FUNNY FEMINISM: READING THE TEXTS AND PERFORMANCES OF VIOLA SPOLIN, TINA FEY AND AMY POEHLER, AND AMY SCHUMER

A Thesis

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LYDIA KATHLEEN ABELL

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Chair of Committee,	Kirsten Pullen
Committee Members,	James Ball
	Kristan Poirot
Head of Department,	Donnalee Dox

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the feminism of Viola Spolin, Tina Fey and Amy Poehler, and Amy Schumer, all of whom, in some capacity, are involved in the contemporary practice and performance of feminist comedy. Using various feminist texts as tools, the author contextually and theoretically situates the women within particular feminist ideologies, reading their texts, representations, and performances as nuanced feminist assertions. Building upon her own experiences and sensations of being a fan, the author theorizes these comedic practitioners in relation to their audiences, their fans, influencing the ways in which young feminist relate to themselves, each other, their mentors, and their role models. Their articulations, in other words, affect the ways feminism is contemporarily conceived, and sometimes, humorously and contentiously advocated.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: ME, MYSELF, FEY, POEHLER, AND SCHUMER

In November 2015, I presented the second chapter of this thesis to a feminist working group at the American Society for Theatre Research's annual conference. The working group's title was "Reclaiming the 'F' Word: Historical and Contemporary Feminist Performance as Theatrical Activism" and called for papers engaging with performance as unsubtle yet appealing forms of advocacy ("2015 Working Sessions"). As I composed my abstract, I gave myself over to my Tina Fey and Amy Poehler fandom, hoping that my passion would convince the conveners of the relevance and appeal of their comedic feminism. I traced the comedians' history through their professional projects—through their "Weekend Update" sketches, their respective memoirs, and their famed television personas—reading each instance as a feminist assertion, establishing Fey and Poehler as discursively feminist icons. As a fan, I argued that I recognized and appreciated their efforts, emphasizing the ways in which Fey and Poehler sanctioned feminist ways of being and humorously advocated feminist ideologies within mainstream popular culture. Situated as one of their young millennial devotees, I suggested that my interpretation was neither singular nor original but spurned by a communal, collective reading of their efforts as not only feminist, but also as inspiring and aspirational. To prove this I would read Tina Fey and Amy Poehler's recent Golden Globes performances as feminist assertions, privileging their humor and my interpretation as proof of their performative

advocacy, outlining the ways in which they appealingly and aspirationally promoted feminism.

Gleefully hearing that I was accepted into the working group, I prepared for the event by estimating what other members would likely ask me about my research. I anticipated questions about the material effects of Fey and Poehler's humor and the specifics of their feminist enactment, but I did not anticipate questions about whether Fey and Poehler were truly feminist. Sitting in small groups, listening to the other the presenters elaborate upon their subjects, I realized that they considered Fey and Poehler as part of a suspect category of performers problematically situated within contemporary popular culture, social media, and millennial audiences. Fey and Poehler's feminist assertions eluded easy categorization, intersecting amongst multiple forms of feminism and working toward ends neither radical nor revolutionary. I did not have an easy answer but cited Fey and Poehler's feminist self-identification as proof and insisted that fans, like myself, read them as feminist. A member of my small group, perhaps sensing my frustration, asked me if I had read Angela McRobbie's "Post-feminism and Popular Culture." I prickled at the title's implication, remembering that I had addressed Fey and Poehler as post-feminist in my prospectus defense and dismissed the notion as inaccurate. I did not think that two comedians diligently using humor to advocate for women warranted a post-feminist reading. "Perhaps looking at the article," the scholar suggested, "will help you articulate exactly why not."

Although this moment was very recent, I mark it as a turning point in my thesis research and writing, a beginning of sorts towards articulating the complexities of my

subjects and elucidating the ways in which they eventually played into and eluded my assumed interpretations. Reading McRobbie's article, I began to see the ways in which Fey and Poehler's feminist enactments aligned with her conceptualization, particularly their memoirs' promotion of "personal choice and self improvement" (261). As I emphasized in my conference abstract, I heralded Fey and Poehler as ideal, lauding them for appealing and incisively advocating for women and modeling resistive tactics for everyday feminists. As my research progressed, however, and as I discussed my interpretations with advisors and colleagues, I began to note the shortcomings of their humor, distinguishing how their jokes exposed their privilege and merely reformed patriarchy. My immediate inclination was then to write off my early assertions as misguided, chalking them up to the naïve imaginings of a star struck Tina Fey and Amy Poehler fan. I suddenly felt guilty of my enthusiasm as if I heedlessly misplaced my devotion. Despite these sensations, however, I still eagerly anticipated the comedians' appearances on daytime and late-night talk, encouraged friends to read their memoirs, and always exclaimed, when I saw one or both of them on television or in movies, "I love her! She's one of my favorites." In short, I was still a fan; still loyal to Tina Fey and Amy Poehler and defensive of individuals criticizing their humor and advocacy. I eventually began recognizing that my dedication was due to my own experiences with the comedians and the ways in which they were wrapped up in my own personal conceptualizations of feminism and involved in my own feminist subjectivity. Tina Fey and Amy Poehler were, in many ways, my introduction to feminism; their *SNL* sketches were one of my first experiences with political and feminist comedy, their memoirs were

encouraging and entertaining respites from the anxieties of advancing into the professional world, and their television personas were my quotable and relatable feminist role models. This project became an effort in reconciling those pleasurable sensations of fandom with my own and others' critiques, finding feminist value in the complexities between advocacy and entertainment, between seriousness and humor, and between being a critic and being an admirer.

The resulting study examines instances of Tina Fey and Amy Poehler's work—particularly their Golden Globes hosting performances—situating the famed comedians within various forms of feminism, reading their texts, representations, and performances as nuanced feminist assertions. My work not only involves in this analysis but also involves mapping a pattern of ideological reproduction beginning with Viola Spolin, who created The Second City's improvisational performance technique, tracing her theories through the comedians' and through one of their contemporary successors, comedian Amy Schumer. I am not only interested, therefore, in how Spolin, Fey, Poehler, and Schumer assert feminist ideologies, but also with how their feminist subjectivities came into being, influenced by particular philosophies and movements and situated within the matrices of professional performance, political comedy, and pop culture entertainment. Their work influences the material consumption, practice, and performance of contemporary comedy, steeping a portion of its practitioners in a feminist-influenced technique and appealingly acclimating its fans to feminist concerns. Their comedic articulations, in other words, are well attended, affecting the ways in

which fans, like myself, relate to each other, to mentors, to role models, and to themselves, shaping feminism's contemporarily conceptualizations and advocacy.

Using various feminist and performance studies texts as tools to construct auto-ethnographic methodology that privileging performances and performative techniques alongside my own experiences, I contextually and theoretically situate the women within constellation of feminist ideologies reproduced from Spolin's technique to the contemporary comedic work of Fey, Poehler, and Schumer. In chapter one, "Viola Spolin and Comedic Improvisation's Feminist Foundation," I examine the theorist's improvisational performance technique, referred to as the Theater Games system in her seminal work *Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques*, as coinciding with feminist ideologies, particularly liberal feminist ideologies. I rely especially upon Alison Jagger's summary of liberal feminism in *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, reading Neva Boyd's theory of play, upon which Viola Spolin's technique was foundationally based, as influenced by liberal philosophies given its intent as a method of social action designed to help children attain conventional social self-realization. I argue that Spolin's performance methodology was similarly influenced, which accounts in many ways for the sometimes oppressive practices of contemporary comedic improv identified and elaborated by Amy E. Seham in *Whose Improv is it Anyway? Beyond Second City*.

I recognize that liberal feminism is a diffuse and complex form and that reducing its theories to the liberalist contention that men are equally rational and to its history in nineteenth century social movements is essentializing, effacing most of subtleties

between it and other forms of feminism but that is not my intention. Rather my emphasis upon liberal feminism in this chapter is intended to introduce aspects of the form's ideologies as part of this feminist ideological reproduction, tracing the assertion of particular ideologies from Boyd and Spolin to Fey, Poehler, and Schumer. In many instances Spolin's articulation of her technique and of its performative intents gestures to other forms of feminism, supporting my contention that these contemporary comedians are reproducing a constellation of feminist theories and ideologies that influence the ways contemporary ways feminists conceive of themselves and of their everyday assertions and articulations.

In chapter two, "A Great Year for Women: Tina Fey and Amy Poehler at the Golden Globe Awards," I examine the comedians' performances and personas as assertions of neoliberal feminist ideologies, according to Angela McRobbie's and bell hooks' conceptualizations of the form. First I conduct a reading of Fey and Poehler's earlier performances and of their memoirs as discursive feminist efforts, bolstering their feminist self-identifications and establishing them as contemporary role models. I then examine particular aspects of the comedians' humor at the Globes, noting the ways in which they advocated feminist politics and revealed themselves to be particularly invested in the ideologies and efforts of neoliberal feminism. Some critics, particularly McRobbie and hooks, consider this investment misguided, indicative of particular socioeconomic privileges that essentialize the divergent experiences, needs, and desires of women into assumed categories, but I argue that Fey and Poehler's comedic efforts were still meaningful. The comedians, in many ways, are the pioneers of a new genre of

feminist comedy attended to by young feminist fans, who like myself, are too young to remember the activist efforts of earlier women comedians, such as Joan Rivers and Rosanne Barr, and who cite Fey and Poehler as their first experience with humor as a form of feminist advocacy. I consider Amy Schumer and other recent women comedians and show-runners, such as Mindy Kaling and Lena Dunham, as their comedic successors, continuing to complicate and articulate the ideological constellation founded by Viola Spolin. Fey and Poehler's Golden Globes performances, therefore, not only situated feminist concerns within mainstream popular culture but also added neoliberal feminist ideologies this pattern of feminist ideological reproduction.

Finally, in chapter three, "Inside the Feminism of Amy Schumer: Interpreting the Comedian's Sketch Comedy Politics," I examine a single sketch from the comedian's popular Comedy Central Show, *Inside Amy Schumer*, as an indictment of the contemporary male gaze. Using Laura Mulvey's examination of cinema's aesthetically censorious practices in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" and framing the comedian as uniquely situated within a new matrix of pop culture, media, and political comedy, I read the sketch as neither particularly liberal nor neoliberal, but truly as a performative articulation of my ideological constellation concept. In "12 Angry Men Inside Amy Schumer," Schumer uses various feminist ideologies from multiple feminist forms to comment on one of the most salient concerns of the movement: the visual and narrative objectification of women. The sketch is more aggressive and decisive than Fey and Poehler's humor at the Globes, gesturing, I argue, toward more complete and considerate methods feminist comedic advocacy.

Theory and Method: Privileging Performances and Fandom

Barring a few significant exceptions, my methodology is modeled after Rosemary Malague's in *An Actress Prepares: Women and "the Method,"* similarly situating my own feminist subjectivity as the motivation, process, and proof of my study. In the work, Malague interrogates the historic practice of Method acting in the United States, examining the pedagogies of some of the form's most prolific instructors, namely Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner, and Uta Hagan, asserting that the instructors' methods inaugurated culture of emotional oppression within the technique. Malague's research sites are extensive, pulling from the instructors' personal and published writings, from audio and visual records of Method classes, from student writings and interviews, and also from her own personal experiences as an actor and acting instructor, privileging her own knowledge alongside more traditional forms of research data. Her experiences, on the one hand, operate as the emphasis of her inquiry, alerting her to inherent gender bias within Method acting, and on the other as hand operate as the auto-ethnographic proof of her claims. She is personally invested, therefore, in her research, emphasizing the ways in which the Method's teaching practices began to chafe against her developing feminist subjectivity, causing her emotional discomfort as both a student and teacher. The outcomes of her research will not only affect her sense of self, but also her sense of her profession and her sense of acting as a trainable skill, influencing her relations with colleagues, students, and fellow practitioners. My research is similarly

motivated and structured situated around my own feminist subjectivity and my efforts to reconcile my feelings of fandom with my own and others' critiques of my favorite feminist comedians.

Ultimately, however, Malague's book is a reconsideration of the Method through a feminist lens, tracing the reproduction of a detrimental pedagogy through various foundational instructors, condemning harmful techniques and praising positive ones. This research does similar work, tracing a pattern of ideological reproduction through the works of various women involved in the contemporary practice and performance of feminist comedy, acknowledging their shortcomings but also emphasizing their successes. Unlike Malague's, however, my efforts are not intended to be proscriptive, neither proposing alternations nor guidance for future feminist comedic assertions, but merely situating myself—an average, enthusiastic, and incisive feminist fan—as the rationale for and of this feminist reading.

In addition, I use feminist and performances studies theories to situate the women contextually and analytically, interpreting their techniques and performances as nuanced feminist assertions. Alison Jaggar's *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* and Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*, as well as Angela McRobbie's "Post-feminism and Popular Culture" and bell hooks' "Dig Deep: Beyond *Lean In*," establish my subjects and their assertions as feminist-influenced, particularly liberal and neoliberal feminist-influenced in the cases of Spolin, Fey, and Poehler. Jaggar's analysis outlines the foundational philosophies and political theories of liberal feminism, allowing me to identify similar strains of thought in Neva Body's "Play—A Unique Discipline" and

Viola Spolin's Theater Games system. Similarly Carol Gilligan's history of the reformative origins of the liberal feminist movement, which began in several late-nineteenth century social movements, reinforces my claim that Boyd's theory and Spolin's technique were methodologically feminist. I also use McRobbie and hooks to do similar work in chapter two, identifying the similarities between their conceptualizations and critiques, identifying particular aspects of Fey and Poehler's Golden Globes humor as invested in neoliberal feminist ideologies. I qualify those critiques, however, by using other feminist and performance studies theories to articulate the value of their feminist assertions in spite of their shortcomings and leniencies.

I emphasize, for example, Jill Dolan's conceptualization of gender reversals in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* to identify similar structures in Fey and Poehler's Globes performances, articulating the ways they used stable conventions to expose systems of oppression in award shows and in the film and television industry. I similarly use Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in chapter three to identify the bold feminist assertion behind Amy Schumer's "12 Angry Men" sketch, illustrating how she cleverly and incisively took on the issue of the structuring male gaze. Ultimately as Joanne R. Gilbert and Nancy Walker argue in their respective studies, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* and *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture*, comedic effort create affective communities through the performative articulation of shared or similar experiences. Certain feminists, such as Angela McRobbie and bell hooks, might dispute this claim, arguing that comedy has the potential to essentialize women's socioeconomic differences and divergent

experiences into universalizing sets of circumstances but I interpret feminist comedy as more discerning, identifying and playing upon some of women's and the movement's most urgent and prevailing concerns.

Literature Review: Performance Techniques and Women in Comedy

As the creator of the Theater Games upon which the techniques of the Compass Players and the Second City were originally based, Viola Spolin is often credited with laying the foundation for what is popularly known today as sketch comedy. Her influential *Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques* was an outgrowth of her collaboration with social worker and educator, Neva Boyd. The two worked together in Chicago in the mid-1920s on the Works Progress Administration's Recreational Project, and Spolin was one of Boyd's first students at the newly founded Recreation Training School (Sweet, xvii). Many histories of Viola Spolin credit Neva Boyd as her inspiration, including Janet Coleman's *The Compass: The Improvisation Theatre that Revolutionized American Comedy*, Anne Libera's *Second City Almanac of Improvisation*, and Jeffery Sweet's *Something Wonderful Right Away: An Oral History of The Second City and The Compass Players*. Even Spolin herself thanked Boyd in *Improvisation for the Theater*'s "Acknowledgements" section, calling her "a pioneer in her field" and writing that "the effects of her inspiration never left" her "for a single day" (xlvii). Most of these histories, however, limit Boyd's inspiration to her groundbreaking curriculum, claiming that Spolin merely gained form her the experiences

necessarily to begin conceptualizing her technique. I alternatively contend that Boyd and Spolin were ideologically aligned, similarly citing the intended outcomes of their disciplines as achieving some version of social self-realization. Boyd's inspiration, therefore, was not only methodological but also theoretical, influencing Spolin's conceptions of what a performance technique could ultimately achieve.

Following her work with Boyd, Spolin continued to develop her improvisational games and theories, particularly during her time collaborating with her son Paul Sills training his Compass and Second City troupes. These comedic collaborations further influenced Spolin's work, adding a professional element to her developing technique, expanding its uses to include professional performers. *Improvisation for the Theater*, which chronicles and codifies her most successful Theater Games, is the foundation of my analysis in chapter one, operating as a standard to which I can compare her earlier efforts. I gathered these efforts from Spolin's official archive at Northwestern University, which is vast including nearly eighty boxes of writings, correspondence, photographs, and audiovisual recordings, a portion of which appears in this research, tracing the earliest origins of my theorized feminist ideological reproduction.

In addition to situating my research amongst histories of Viola Spolin, specifically those recounting her training efforts with The Compass and The Second City, I also situate my research amongst others theorizing or historicizing performative techniques, specifically those related to Spolin's. I most prominently situate myself in relation to Amy E. Seham's *Whose Improv is it Anyway? Beyond Second City*, which is a study of gender and race within Chicago improv comedy in the 1990s. Seham's work

originated within her own experiences practicing and performing improv and within her desire to understand the genre's complex and contradictory teachings (xi). She describes her experiences as freeing on the one hand, moving beyond traditionally scripted drama, and as oppressive on the other, reflecting racist and misogynistic worldviews (xi-xii). Building upon ethnography, Seham exposes the ways Chicago improv's intentions conflicted with much of its everyday practice, forcing women and minority students to perform and participate in stereotypes (xvii). I do not dispute her assertions but rather read them as proof of my claim that these issues relate back to Spolin and to her conceptualization of improvisation as ultimately individualistic.

Furthermore, I also situate my research in relation to studies examining the theories and practices of other performance techniques, specifically those that influenced and resulted from Spolin's. In addition to relying upon Rosemary Malague's *An Actress Prepares: Women and "the Method"* as a methodological model, I also use her work to set Spolin's theories against the Method's, illustrating how she imagined her Theater Games as antithetical. Improvisation, she argued, encouraged intuitive behavior, which could only come to the surface when performers' were distracted, hindered from returning to their own socialized, self-preserving tendencies. Rather than urging her students to look internally for motivations, Spolin insisted that the Games would provide, forcing performers to make snap decisions and react automatically. Their performances, therefore, would be more natural and authentic, freed from overwrought considerations of the Method. George Kouvaros in *Famous Faces Yet Not Themselves:* The Misfits *and Icons of Postwar America* portrays some of the detrimental side effects

of the Method, illustrating how some of its performers grew increasingly reliant upon instructor input. His observations align with Malague's and with her contention that certain Method instructors, namely Lee Strasberg and Sanford Meisner, inaugurated a pedagogy of oppression within the technique, developing detrimental teaching styles that their processors heedlessly mimicked. Spolin's Theater Games were alternatively designed to empower performers, creating performative scenarios wherein even the most inexperienced actors would know best how to respond.

As The Second City grew in popularity and as it developed a reputation as the scouting grounds for producer Lorne Michael's television sketch series, *Saturday Night Live*, other improv theatres began popping up in Chicago, claiming that their techniques were more innovative. One such theatre was Charna Halpern's ImprovOlympic, which was originally co-founded by David Shepherd, who was one of the creators of The Compass. She and Shepherd clashed from the beginning over the day-to-day running of the theatre and school, eventually parting ways and freeing Halpern to reconceive of the Olympic as an alternative to The Second City. Together, she and Del Close created the Harold technique, a longer, more sustained version of Viola Spolin's Theatre Games, which focused on performing a series of long, interrelated scenes. They eventually outlined the specifics of the Harold in their own performance manual, *Truth in Comedy: The Manual of Improvisation*, writing that "for improvisers scattered across the country" this was their only access to reputable training theatres (8). Years later, a group of their most successful students, well-trained in the Harold technique, moved their troupe to New York City, founding what is popularly know today as the UCB or the Upright

Citizen's Brigade. The troupe, which is now bicoastal with multiple theatres on both the East and West coasts, is famous for training some of contemporary comedy's most famous performers, including Aziz Ansari, Aubrey Plaza, Ellie Kemper, and Kate McKinnon. Amy Poehler was also an original co-founder, expanding Del Close's Harold technique alongside Matt Besser, Ian Roberts, and Matt Walsh. Their improv manual was released in 2013 and is the official training text of their improv schools.

Matt Fotis in *Long Form Improvisation and American Comedy: The Harold* traces this complex improvisational history, elaborating upon the origins of the Harold and theorizing its influence upon contemporary television and film comedy. Although not specifically related to Viola Spolin and concerning an alternative technique, Fotis' work is much like my own, seeking to establish the affect of improvisational techniques upon contemporary comedy and analyzing its influence upon lives of practitioners and viewers. His study is also technique-based, analyzing the theoretic and methodological differences between Halpern and Close's and Besser, Poehler, Roberts, and Walsh's techniques, inferring the ideological motivations behind their decisions.

Finally, I also situate my work within studies examining women in comedy, specifically performative comedy including improv, theatre, film/television, and stand-up. Regardless of form, however, many studies mention the foundational efforts of Judy Little in *Comedy and the Woman Writer: Woolf, Spark, and Feminism* regardless of its grounding in literature. Regina Barreca in the introduction to *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy* contends that many critics perceived women's comedy as trivial, insipid, and unworthy of serious attention, resulting in a dearth of studies analyzing

material. She names Little's book as one of the first critically analyzing women's comedic literature, contending that women wrote more than simply to be entertaining, but also to aggressively and incisively reform the lives. Barreca's collection, as well as June Sochen's *Women's Comedic Visions* and Nancy A. Walker's *What's So Funny? Humor in American Culture*, each contains essays or chapters concerning performative comedy, mostly stand-up but also including slapstick television performers and screwball movie comedies. Joanne R. Gilbert's study, on the other hand, is truly a performative text, analyzing numerous women stand-up comedians and illuminating the political, social, and cultural implications of their humor. Like myself, she reads each of their efforts as feminist assertions, invested within particular theories and articulating particular feminist ideologies. It is from her work that I draw my most glowing praise of Tina Fey and Amy Poehler and also of feminist comedy in general, asserting that their jokes performed particular marginalities, drawing audiences and fans together through the humorous articulation of certain shared gendered experiences.

CHAPTER II

VIOLA SPOLIN AND COMEDIC IMPROVISATION'S FEMINIST FOUNDATION

During a theatre workshop at Sarah Lawrence College in 1966, Viola Spolin told an attending female performer: "Don't be afraid that you will misbehave or do that which you shouldn't do." Addressing the larger student audience, Spolin explained, "you won't, especially if you're girls… a certain type of middle class group who have been very much trained in controls, proper behavior, and so on. You don't have to worry about overflow, in fact, we're trying to get at it." The transcription of this workshop, which begins at the conclusion of an improvised scene, consists primarily of Spolin lecturing about her Theater Games system as a supportive performance technique. The actress, cited in the transcript simply as "S," was describing her experience performing in the previous scene. She was beginning to feel "more relaxed" as performer, which to Spolin, implied that prior to this training she was performing with certain amount of mental or physical tension. "I don't know if it was because I became aware of my muscles or because I didn't become aware of them before," S explained, but "they just started acting" on their own. "In other words," prompted Spolin, "you did not realize" that you were unconsciously holding yourself back in performance.

Pushing the actress further, Spolin asked her to consider the origin of that tension. "What creates the holding back?" S suggested that it was her fear of becoming too emotionally exposed during performance. According to her, an actress "always keeps something" separate from that vulnerable experience; some intimate aspect of her

internal self that requires preservation. “Usually,” she explained, “you’re not totally with it in your body because you’re keeping something away from it.” Spolin equated the impulse with the ego, not in the Freudian psychoanalytic sense of the term, but in her own self-constructed sense of the ego as socially conditioned and self-preserving. In a fragmented personal writing from August 4, 1963, Spolin describes the ego as a “curious archaic appendage,” contributing to the annihilation of the self, feeding feelings of “resentment, bewilderment [and] separateness” that protect individuals from unguarded moments of spontaneous personal revelation (“August 4, 1963” 2).

In her seminal work, *Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques*, Spolin refers to these revelatory moments as intuitive, arguing that they are essential to performance. We learn best “though experience and experiencing,” she writes (Spolin 3). “This is as true for the infant moving from kicking to crawling to walking as it is for the scientist” solving complex equations (Spolin 3). It involves the instinctual movement of an individual into a particular environment, marking the ascension of that individual beyond socially constructed intellectual planes (Spolin 3-4). “Restrictions of culture, race, education, psychology, and age,” as well as conditioned “mannerisms, prejudices [and] intellectualisms” prevent intuitive behavior, stunting everyday actions and carrying over into aesthetic performances. Spolin’s Theater Games system is designed to encourage that kind of intuitive experiencing by forcing performers into moments of absolute immediacy (Spolin 4).

The foundation of her technique is the structure of the game, a “natural group form” that provides involvement and structured “personal freedom” (*Improvisation for*

the Theater 4). In response to S's admission at the workshop, Spolin explained that the internal limits of her Theater Games do not allow for unnecessarily excessive or unfettered performance. Just like ordinary games, there are rules in place in order to prevent chaos. "You don't have to be fearful," she promises, because the Game "will hold you," preventing you from "running berserk" ("Sarah Lawrence Theatre Workshop" 6). "It's better to have more than enough crust to cover the pie," or more than enough energy to sustain a scene, but an actor should not have to censor his or her behavior ("Sarah Lawrence Theatre Workshop" 5). "Let all kind of things come out," she encourages; the Game will appropriately "clip them" ("Sarah Lawrence Theatre Workshop" 5).

Amy Seham, however, in *Whose Improv is it Anyway: Beyond Second City*, finds Spolin's theory idealistic and flawed, arguing that in reality, "spontaneous group creation... taps into reserves of shared references, received truths, and common knowledge" (xxi), and not as Spolin claims, the agreed upon results of mutual participation. In highly charged moments of improvisation, participants tend to gravitate toward popular and familiar cultural references that rely upon stereotypical representations of women and minority groups, which when rewarded with laughter, become discursively reinforced (Seham xxi). Contrary to Spolin's claim, therefore, that improvisation transcends limitations of the familiar, the approved, and the everyday, Seham asserts that comedic improv relies upon socially and culturally resonant content. That resonance depends upon believability, sometimes requiring that participants source experiences from their own everyday lives, which are re-channeled into stereotypically

sexist or racist scenarios. Given that these experiences must ultimately suit the requirements of a Game, every intimate part of an individual is potentially demanded by improvised performance. Thus Spolin's promise at Sarah Lawrence failed to consider the inconsistencies between the theory and the practice of her Games.

Seham conflates Spolin's technique, as its laid out in *Improvisation for the Theater*, with the policies and procedures of Chicago's Second City theatre. Spolin did, indeed, pioneer the theatre's improvisational approach by integrating her games into their training and performance procedures, but Seham's study is more contemporary, analyzing the theatre in the 1990s. Spolin was mother of Second City founder, Paul Sills, and was working in Chicago in 1955 when his partner, David Shepard, asked her to extend her stay and train their new acting company (Sweet xxiii). That venture was called The Compass and eventually developed into The Second City, shaping a new genre of comedic performance. *Improvisation for the Theater* developed out of that creative collaboration, reaching "its final form" when the author saw how her techniques worked professionally with adult performers (*Improvisation for the Theater* l). Spolin, Sills, and Shepard eventually—and not entirely amicably—parted ways, but her techniques remain the foundation of The Second City and of other late Chicago-based/Chicago-style improv theatres, such as the ImprovOlympic and the Upright Citizens Brigade. Practices, however, do shift and change overtime. Seham herself writes, in 2004, that there is an "uneasy alliance" between improv comedy's process and product, and its "shamanism and showbiz" (xvii). As The Second City's legend as America's preeminent comedic training ground grew and as several of its early

performers made the leap from the theatre to *Saturday Night Live*, The Second City's technique expanded and developed to suit the needs of its new professional performers. Spolin is still there, however, in the language and the conceptualization of the technique, despite the assertions of subsequent teachers that their methods are uniquely and inherently different.

In this chapter, I contend that Viola Spolin's improvisation technique, in theory and intent, aligns with certain feminist ideologies, most prominently with those of liberal feminism. In my first section, I outline Spolin's training, theory, and technique, tracing her Theater Games system from its origins with Neva Boyd at the Recreation Training School, through her work for the Works Progress Administration, to her publication of *Improvisation for the Theater*. In my second section, I will interrogate Amy Seham's assertions in *Whose Improv is it Anyway?*, examining the ways in which improv comedies' improvisational training practices were eventually diminished, to certain extent, by the same ideologies that originally bolstered Spolin's Theater Games technique.

Spontaneity: Spolin's Training, Theory, and Technique

Viola Spolin's Theater Games system is based upon her experiences teaching and supervising dramatic performance in Chicago first at Jane Addams' Hull-House, next at the WPA's Recreational Project, and finally at that city's first improv theatre, The Second City. Spolin began her training with Neva Boyd in 1924, at the newly founded

Recreation Training School, which was formerly the Chicago School for Civics and Philanthropy's Recreation Department (Simon). Boyd was the "director and organizing force of the school, an expert in the field of social work, formalizing a theory of play as democratizing form of social discipline for children. Her efforts were ameliorative, seeking to improve neighborhood immigrant and inner-city children's socioeconomic welfare by providing them with safe and constructive activities through which appropriate social behaviors could be productively rehearsed. I argue that her efforts, both ideologically and methodologically, aligned with those of early feminists, similarly dedicated to reforming "prevailing practices" deemed "damaging to present and future generations" (Gilligan 128-129). Spolin's subsequent performance technique, which the theorist herself admits was inspired by Boyd, is similarly ideological and methodologically motivated, originally invented in order to train Recreational Project participants as teacher-directors in neighborhood children's programs (*Improvisation for the Theater* xlvii). The intent of her technique, however, was never to train the teachers-directors in methods that would conventionally socialize the children, but rather to train them in methods that would help children to transcend socially approved ways of being ("1939" 3-4). This intent was maintained through the out the many versions of her technique, even despite its eventual formal adaption into a method of standardized actor training for adults.

Neva Boyd began working professionally during the "playground and recreation movement," which according to *The Social Welfare History Project*, began with the founding of the United States' first playground in Boston in 1885 ("The Beginning of

the Recreation Movement in the United States"). A "social awakening" of sorts corresponded with the founding of park, "a general realization" that the problems confronting US children—child labor, increased immigration, factory work, and bad housing—were stunting their physical and psychological development, preventing them from achieving socioeconomic success ("The Beginning of the Recreation Movement in the United States"). Boyd's own formal education had been similarly interrupted, prompting her, according to W. Paul Simon in "Neva Boyd: A Biographical Sketch," to dedicate her early career to training playground workers, and/by conducting informal social work courses in Chicago from 1904 to 1910. Her efforts quickly attracted the attention of city's civic activities promoters, garnering her a coveted position as the co-director of a new revolutionary education venture called the Chicago Training School for Playground Workers (Simon). The project was short-lived but very successful, allowing Boyd and her co-director, Mari Huef Hofer, to develop a reservoir of civic good will, which sustained the project even after the school's eventual demise (Simon). Finding a permanent home at the Recreation Training School, housed in what is now commonly referred to as Jane Addams' Hull-House, Boyd created a curriculum that spanned one academic year and culminated in a certificate of completion.

Coursework covered a variety of topics, including "theoretical courses, technical classes, dramatic art, supervision and administration, and social treatment," with fieldwork projects structured according to "the particular interests and needs" of students (Simon). Spolin, in the "Acknowledgements" section of *Improvisation for the Theater*, thanks Boyd for her inspiration, writing that she received from her at the school "an

extraordinary training the use of games, story-telling, folk dance, and dramatics as tools for stimulating creative expression… through self-discovery and personal experiencing" (xlvii). She neglects to mention, however, Boyd's foundational interest in the social and psychological effects of group play, which were highlighted in the theoretical section of her coursework (Simon). Spolin's mention of Boyd's "use of games" only scrapes at the surface of her instructor's preoccupation, which eventually developed into a formalized theory of play laid out in her 1934 article, "Play—A Unique Discipline." In the piece, Boyd—who by that time had been appointed to Northwestern University's department of sociology—writes from experience, theorizing that that a good game, "like drama, eliminates irrelevancies, bringing events into close sequence in such concentrated and simplified" forms "as to condense, in both time and space, the essence of a complex and long-drawn-out typical life experience" (414-415). In other words, the pressures of games, which are heightened by rules and limitations, create scenarios that must be solved, forcing players to rely upon previously obtained knowledge and skills, such as logic and strategy, as they would in everyday life. "In this way, and because of the varied content of games," the player, or in case of Boyd's research, "the child, gets both more and different experiences from play than is otherwise possible" in of his or her daily life (Boyd 415). Boyd's subjects were children, typically from impoverished immigrant families living in the tenements surrounding Hull-House, with little time, space, or freedom for such edifying activities (Simon). Boyd argued that games significantly contributed to their "transition from self-gratification to self-determinism," forcing them to accept problems and requirements, to work productively with others, and

to follow rules, which fostered a sense of self-discipline necessary to adulthood (415). Thus group games, as Boyd conceived of them, were an egalitarian tool allowing disadvantaged children to "safely and constructively" rehearse the same social practices as their economically privileged peers (416). Liberal political theory, upon which liberal feminism is based, is similarly democratic, advocating for the dignity, autonomy, and self-fulfillment of each individual (Jaggar 33).

Sociologists, anthropologists, and performances studies scholars have similarly used the concept of play typically as a metaphor—and without attribution—for structures of social communication and cultural transformation. Gregory Bateson, for example, in "A Theory of Play and Fantasy" from *Steps to an Ecology of the Mind*, argues against logical positivism by creating a natural history of communication, fundamentally reconfiguring previous conceptualizations of social language and social life. Observing monkeys at the Fleishhacker Zoo in San Francisco, Bateson noticed that their playing habits closely resembled those of combat and yet they were clearly signaling their intentions as playful (179). Based upon this experience, he concluded that the phenomenon of play, or indeed any form of social interaction, can only occur if "the participant organisms" are capable of "some degree of metacommunication," or the exchanging of symbols connoting certain types of interaction (Bateson 179). Metacommunitive frames, according to Bateson, are culturally, historically, and socially specific, cuing individual interpretations of certain situations. Aesthetic performances, such theatre, require comprehensive metacommunitive framing in order to indicate to audiences that the action on the stage is neither real nor actually occurring. If the frame

is poorly communicated, however, audiences are free to interpret the action at will, possibly involving themselves in a breech of social or cultural etiquette. Games are similarly metacommunitive, accounting for children's recognition of the action as play. "Repeatedly," notes Boyd, "writers on the subject… discuss the differences between work and play" in terms of enjoyment, which may increase with the change from one form to another, but does not account for the essential difference, which she says is artifice (414). Games are artificial situations "set up imaginatively" with predetermined structures and roles, which must be willingly accepted by all participants in order for players to solve the problems therein (Boyd 414). Children are able to play freely and safely because the game's consequences, however heightened by these structures and roles, are never based in their lived reality. Games frame the play as harmless through sets of predetermined expectations, limitations, and tones.

On the other hand, Victor Turner's metaphoric use of play in "Social Dramas and Stories About Them," is based in structures of transformation. He regards social drama "as the experimental matrix from which… genres of cultural performance, beginning with regressive ritual and juridical procedures," were creatively generated (158). He defines ritual as prescribed behavior "for occasions… having reference to beliefs in invisible beings or powers regarded as the first and final cause of effects" (Turner 159). This formulation is "operationally useful," according to Turner, because it conceives of ritual "as essentially performance," which always works to bring something about, generating new and unprecedented insights, symbols, and meanings (160). Liminality, however, must also be taken into account, "for it is in this phase"—the concept of phases

coming from Arnold van Gennep's conceptualization of ritual "as accompanying transitions from one situation," or phase, "to another" (10)—"that the emic folk characterizations of ritual lay [the] strongest stress on the transformative action" of invisible beings and powers" (Turner 161). Without liminality, "ritual becomes indistinguishable from ceremony," only indicating and never transforming (Turner 161). Thus

> ritual's liminal phrase… approximates to the subjunctive mood of sociocultural action [representing] a time and a place lodged between all times and places defined and governed [by] rules of law, politics… religion… and economic necessity… [It] contains the potentiality for cultural innovation… effecting structural transformations within relatively stable sociocultural systems (Turner 165).

Even when cultures attempted to circumscribe this liminality by pressing it into "the service of maintaining" existing social forms, there was still room, according to Turner, for various forms of verbal and symbolic play (Turner 166). Building upon Johan Huizinga's analysis of tribal and agrarian cultures in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, Turner asserts that the "innovative potential of ritual liminality… is particularly conducive" to acts of play (165-166). There was a play of meanings, for example, "involving the reversal of hierarchical orderings of values and social statuses," and plays with words, resulting in practices of "joyous or serious punning" (Turner 166).

Neva Boyd similarly theorizes play's transformative capabilities, arguing that games allow "flesh and blood children to act naturally within" artificial situations,

organizing their elemental natures into "socially acceptable patterns" of behavior (416). Her conceptualization is in service of innovation, therefore, like Turner's, but not in service of radical innovation, merely reaffirming the value of existing socioeconomic systems. This marks a notable difference between the theorists, but more significantly Turner, Gregory Bateson before him, are using play as an illustrative metaphor, demonstrating how the activity is a form of social experimentation, or in the case of Bateson, a form of social interaction. Boyd's conceptualization, on the other hand, imagines play as a tool of socioeconomic reform, unconsciously training immigrant and inner-city children in the contextual conventions of social interaction, helping them obtain rights and opportunities equal to their socioeconomically privileged peers. Clearly this effort establishes Boyd's as feminist influenced, similarly advocating for individual equality through ameliorative social action and also through education.

Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, outlines the ideological origins of the women's movement, beginning with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott's convention in Seneca Falls in the summer of 1848. Gilligan's intent is not to write a history of the movement but rather to contextualize her analysis of "the renewed struggle for women's rights," through these early feminists' claims of "responsibility for themselves" (128-129). Her contextualization does, however, trace the origins of the movement through social action, grounding early feminist efforts in attempts to combat accusations of selfishness through projects of social reform (Gilligan 128). When the women at the convention, "outraged by their relegation to the balconies" during the World Anti-Slavery

Convention in 1840, "claimed for themselves… the rights of citizenship," they set themselves in opposition to "feminine virtue," which promoted selflessness and self-abnegation (Gilligan 128). They countered accusations of selfishness with claims that slavery and self-sacrifice were the same, echoing Mary Wollstonecraft's earlier arguments in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Gilligan 128). Women's development, they claimed, could "serve to promote the general good," involving itself in various late-nineteenth century social movements, including social purity movements as well as "more radical movements for free love and birth control" (Gilligan 128).

Gilligan's description of these latter movements as radical, however, contextualizes Stanton, Mott, and Wollstonecraft as progressive within their time rather than nominating them as radical feminists as defined and understood in the 1970s and 1980s. They were proponents of an early form of feminism ground in liberal theories and ideologies, which Alison Jaggar outlines in *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*. Liberal political theory, she asserts, is grounded in the conceptualization of human beings as "essentially rational agents," united by a common mental capacity for reason (Jaggar 28) and, therefore, equally entitled to rights ensuring their "intrinsic and ultimate value" (33). Stanton and Mott's claim to responsibility argued that women's rational capacity was equal to that of men's, establishing them as capable of exercising a comparable sense of moral reasoning (Gilligan 128). According to Gilligan, this rationality manifested in social efforts designed in order to exert control over the social and civil conditions affecting women's lives (128). Their intent was the attainment of "equalized opportunities," never supplanting liberalism's foundational contention that all human

beings, regardless of socialized differences, were equally and essentially rational (37). As Jill Dolan, in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, pithily summarizes, liberal feminism, "rather than proposing radical structural change," contends that "working within existing social and political organizations will eventually secure" all women some semblance of "social, political, and economic parity with men" (3). Boyd's theory, which works toward the gradual integration of immigrant and inner-city children into existing "sociocultural systems" (Turner 165), is invested to certain extent in the philosophies of liberal feminism affirming rather than overturning prevailing structures of power.

Traces of her teachings appear in Viola Spolin's improvisational training technique, which was first conceptualized during her work for Chicago's Works Progress Administration. Following her training with Boyd, Spolin spent a number of years performing professionally in the city, occasionally leading recreational programs for organizations and interested participants. In 1937, she returned to her roots, working for the WPA out of Hull-House, training instructors in folk dance and creative dramatics. One of her responsibilities was conducting field visits to the organizations' numerous programs and sites. In a field visit report from March 22, 1938, Spolin observed that Lincoln Park West's puppet and woodcarving groups were, by far, the branch's most well-attended, probably because groups of children work best together, and most enjoy socializing, when their interactions are organized around the completion of specific activities ("Field Visit Report: Project #3418" 1). This observation reiterated Boyd's theory of play, which valued non-competitive games specifically for their ability to

unconsciously organize children into artificial situations that garnered reasonable creative experimentation and encouraged appropriate socialization (414).

Spolin's technique, however, was not intended to train the instructors in dramatic methods that would conventionally socialize the children, but rather to train them in dramatic methods that would help them to transcend socially approved ways of being. In several personal writings, Spolin argued that social conventions were stunting individualism and creativity, contributing to self-consciousness and social awkwardness ("1939" 4). "Group work," she wrote in 1939, "is one of the finest field's open to the educator" ("1939" 1). On the one hand, "it develops an individual's awareness of his own value" as a community member, "teaching him a deep sense of cooperation [and] responsibility," and on the other, it discourages "awkwardness and self-consciousness," stimulating spontaneous and liberating creativity and imagination ("1939 1-4). The former benefits are similar to Boyd's, apparently teaching children behaviors that would serve them well in social situations and integrating them into preexisting sociocultural systems, while the latter benefits hint at a kind of transversive potential, working against an imagined, oppressive force. In a personal writing from 1940, Spolin describes this force as socialization, blaming it for robbing individuals of their innate creativity through structures of approval and disapproval (*Improvisation for the Theater* 6). "In the course of the growth of the individual," she writes, "many things happen," including the thwarting of a certain freedom of expression, which was tolerated and even encouraged in youth ("1940" 1). "Into the young, fresh… vital world" of childhood, she writes, walls are built constructed from the censorious expressions and practices of parents and adults

("1940" 1). Constantly hearing censures such as, "you can't go in there that is for the talented," or "don't go in their, you are growing up… that is a silly way for a girl to act," eventually obscures the sunny spots of childhood, standardizing behavior according to certain preconceived notions of propriety and appropriateness ("1940" 1).

Spolin does not attribute these censures, which she refers to in *Improvisation for the Theater* as "approval/disapproval," to the homogenizing influences of sexism, racism, and classism, instead conceptualizing them as merely innate within social culture (6-7). She does, however, correctly theorize their self-regulatory effects, asserting that they quickly develop into individualized practices of self-censorship, which influence the natural ways individuals behave and interact within certain situations. Michel Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, attributes similar results to his conceptualization of panopticism, which theorizes the state as an apparatus of disciplinary power. Building upon Jeremy Bentham's design for a prison, Foucault theorizes that the state is constantly surveying its subjects, gradually standardizing their behavior unconsciously (Foucault 204). As a result, the state can eventually "throw off its physical weight," becoming non-corporeal in its presence and all the more constant, profound, and permanent in its effects (Foucault 204). Spolin similarly theorizes the effects of social convention, conceptualizing it as disembodied from authority and exercised by socialized parents, teachers, and adults. She stops short of naming the power, however, failing to contextualize her students and attribute their social conventions to patriarchy and "the white racial frame" (Feagin x). She correctly theorizes the effects of socialization, therefore, noting the ways in which it alters

individual behavior as it becomes internalized, recapitulating from one generation of children/parents/teachers to the next, but fails to name the site and context its power. In other words, she does not query the source of "approval/disapproval" (*Improvisation for the Theater* 6) merely accepting it as innate and expressing a desire to transcend its effects. She imagines social conventions affecting different populations and groups equally, failing like liberal feminism, to account for socioeconomic differences.

Spolin also eventually expanded her conceptualization of "approval/disproval" to include acting instructors, whose judgments she said prevented free relationships in performance (*Improvisation for the Theater* 8). "True personal freedom and self-expression," she writes, "can only flower in an atmosphere where attitudes permit equality between student and teacher, and the dependencies of teacher for student and student for teacher are done away with" (*Improvisation for the Theatre* 9). This allusion to performances' physical spaces, as well as to the inequality of acting training, references the Method, Lee Strasberg, and The Actor's Studio. Rosemary Malague in *An Actress Prepares: Women and "the Method"* claims that Strasberg's teaching technique was oppressive, inaugurating a legacy of pedagogical dependence in Method acting training. As proof she cites instances wherein Strasberg withheld his coveted approval from his students, encouraged his actresses to arouse their male spectators, and blatantly told his performers that they were unfit for certain roles. Malague traces Strasberg's teaching styles through the pedagogies of other Method instructors, specifically Sanford Meisner, Stella Adler, and Uta Hagan, asserting that they recreated elements of his technique, fostering an inimical legacy of actor training. Writing in the 1950s and 1960s,

Spolin was aware of Strasberg's reputation and the growing popularity of the Method technique. Her claim in *Improvisation for the Theater*, therefore, that her technique was non-authoritarian, "non-verbal [and] non-psychological" was addressing these Method critiques. Spolin did not, however, entirely amend her conceptualization of "approval/disapproval" to include acting instructors, but merely expanded it, maintaining that acting conventions were similarly socialized (*Improvisation for the Theatre* 8). Her training technique was designed to transcend these standardized behaviors through improvised, game-based play and performance (*Improvisation for the Theater* xlix-l).

The goal was spontaneity, which Spolin theorized was only possible when the mind was occupied. The children in her WPA groups began counting off into teams and deciding collectively what they would perform ("Children's Recreation" 1). They created the scenes themselves, using an uncomplicated guiding structure called "Where, Who, and What," to organize scenes by solving particular problems (*Improvisation for the Theater* xlix). Audience members were sometimes allowed to give suggestions, which Spolin encouraged as it demonstrated the truly improvised nature of the activity (*Improvisation for the Theater* xlix). As Spolin standardized her methods, reconfiguring her Games to aesthetic performance, she formalized her concept of problem solving into "the point of concentration" (*Improvisation for the Theater* 21) and her concept of "Where, Who, What" (xlix) into "preparation for the acting problem" both designed to enable spontaneous performance. Preoccupied with solving the problem and performing a role, the actor would achieve spontaneity through the excitement of playing the game.

Thus Spolin's technique evolved from training instructors, to teaching social skills to children, to training instructors to encourage participants to transcend their own standardized social behaviors. Socialization stunted performance on stage, and also everyday personal and professional ways of being. Viola Spolin's technique, liked Boyd's theory of play, is feminist influenced because of its theoretical and methodological founding in the ameliorative efforts of a reformative social movements and ideologies. At the same time, and as will become important to the feminist comedies of Fey, Poehler, and Schumer, it also gestures to later more radicalized feminist ideologies through its desire to disrupt and overcome oppressive standards of social behavior through processes of improvised gaming.

There's No "I" in "Group": The Uneasy Alliance Between Spolin's Improvisational Theory and Comedic Improv Performance

Charna Halpern, in *Truth in Comedy: The Manuel of Improvisation*, writes that she decided to reconceptualize the ImprovOlympic's improvisational technique in 1983 because "it was beginning to look like a replica of Second City" (3). Similarly, Matt Besser, Ian Roberts, and Matt Walsh write in *The Upright Citizens Brigade Comedy Improvisation Manual*, that "short form improvisation," the technique used at The Second City, "revolves around the performance of short 'games' with predetermined rules or gimmicks," which actors know prior to entering scenes (7). Halpern's assertion is fairly innocuous, tapping into a discourse of originality characteristic to Chicago

improvisation, but Besser, Roberts, Walsh's contention is more confrontational, setting themselves in direct opposition to the Second City's technique, based in the work of Viola Spolin. These claims to originality intervene within the ambivalences between Spolin's theory and the everyday contemporary practice of Chicago-style comedic improvisation.

In *Whose Improv is it Anyway? Beyond the Second City*, Amy E. Seham focuses on the unsettling contradictions inherent within Spolin's assertions, elucidating the ways in which these rhetorical inconsistencies remain palpable within the contemporary Chicago-style comedic improvisation. Seham asserts that "there are tensions in improv-comedy between" the forms' rhetorics of freedom and self-expression, and the rigid rules that govern actual performance (xxiv). Seham's critique of Chicago-style comedic improvisation is extensive, primarily concerning the disconnects between the techniques' foundational theories—introduced and formalized by Spolin—and the problematic ways in which they have been implemented practically over time (xxiv). Seham asserts that from the beginning the disparate strands of improv-comedy sometimes meshed to create exciting performances, and sometimes strained and pulled apart (xvii). According to her,

> The uneasy alliance of improvisation and comedy, process and product, shamanism and showbiz, personal growth and sociopolitical satire is intrinsic to improv's nature. These built in conflicts are the cause of both improv's appeal and of the constant quest to reform and perfect the art (xvii).

She finds fault, for example, with Spolin's concept of group expression, which exists in similar forms in nearly all of comedic improvisation's most popular techniques. Charna Halpern, Del Close, and Kim "Howard" Johnson in *Truth in Comedy: The Manual of Improvisation*, emphasize processes of "group agreement" (45). Matt Besser, Ian Roberts, and Matt Walsh in *The Upright Citizen Brigade: Comedy Improvisation Manual*, call their concept "group mind" (18-19). Less intangible than these later more abstract concepts, Spolin's group expression involved rechanneling competitiveness through participation in play (*Improvisation for the Theater* (9-10). In 1973, Spolin asserted that her Theater Games trick players into taking risks, losing themselves in the joys and pleasures of the process. This loss self creates group unity, eliminating competition and comparison (*Improvisation for the Theatre* 11). Spolin writes that "when working with a group… playing and experiencing things together," student-actors integrate themselves within the whole activity; differences as a well as similarities are accepted as students actively participate within each moment (10). Though the most gifted students, according to Spolin, "will always seem to have more to give," students participating "to the limit of his or her powers" and using their abilities to the fullest extent will always be respected no matter how minute or subtle their contributions (10).

Seham finds Spolin's theory idealistic and flawed, arguing that in reality "spontaneous group creation... taps into reserves of shared references, received truths, and common knowledge" (xxi), and not as Spolin claims, the results of mutual participation. She claims that the sources of these collective representations are twofold, resulting on the one hand from archetype, stereotype, and myth (Seham xxi), and on the

other from personal experience. The pressures of comedic improvisation lead participants toward popular and familiar cultural references (Seham xxi). These references typically rely upon stereotypical representations of women and minorities, which when rewarded with laughter, become discursively reinforced. Simultaneously effaced by the extemporaneous natures of improv performance and by rhetorics of emotional fortitude in comedy, stereotypes come together in improvised narratives, appearing "natural, inevitable, and true" (Seham xxi).

The group, in Spolin's improvisational training technique, like the group in Neva Boyd's theory of play and the groups in early feminist social movements, are ultimately in service of individuals, helping them each to achieve separate social and comedic self-realization. They are not intended to be communities, but rather assemblages of autonomous individuals working toward a common, unifying goal. Thus differences of experience are obscured as performers rely more completely and fully upon other members, who are not looking out for each other but rather looking out for themselves. Chicago-style improvisation, therefore, incorrectly assumes that the successes of the group's are everyone's, failing to correctly conceive of experiences as varied and socioculturally specific.

Despite these critiques, however, there is something intrinsically revolutionary in the practice and performance of comedy that Spolin's and subsequent techniques come very close to capturing; a way of encouraging performers to find resonate experiences that speak to certain audiences. Although in improvisation that encouragement sometimes pressures students into reaching for convenient humor and stereotypical

jokes, that motivation is powerful, and as illustrated by Fey, Poehler, and Schumer, aggressively feminist.

CHAPTER III

"A GREAT YEAR FOR WOMEN": TINA FEY AND AMY POEHLER AT THE GOLDEN GLOBE AWARDS

After taking a deep fortifying breath, Tina Fey launched headlong into her 2015 Golden Globes greeting, "Good evening, good evening, and welcome you bunch of despicable, spoiled, minimally talented brats" (NBC). Many hosts would not dare welcome their audience with an insult, but Tina Fey and her "comedy wife" (Poehler), Amy Poehler, have developed unique public personae equal parts prickly, sexy, and feminist. They wielded them at the awards, poking at the attending performers and artists, incisively implying that their achievements, particularly the men's, are a result of Hollywood's historically sexist machinations. At the 2014 Globes, for example, Fey diminished Matthew McConaughey's drastic *Dallas Buyer's Club* weight loss by quipping that losing forty- five pounds is "what actresses call 'being in a movie'" (Ken-is-Busy). In their 2015 opening, Poehler sarcastically praised *Boyhood* director, Richard Linklater, for proving "that there are still great roles for women over forty" as long as they are cast when they are under forty (NBC). Audiences' shrieks and squeals went unheeded; Fey and Poehler dismissed them with coy smiles and disdainful shrugs. They strategically harnessed their discursively neoliberal feminist personae, popularized through their other comedic performances and publications, to shrewdly malign the sexist practices of Hollywood.

This gendered pop culture commentary alludes to their tenure hosting *Saturday Night Live's* "Weekend Update." In a popular segment of the sketch, which aired on the show in early 2008, Fey returned as "a special Women's News correspondent," hosting a segment on Hillary Clinton's bid for the 2008 democratic presidential nomination (UCB Comedy). Fey wondered, "Why are people abandoning Hillary for Obama?" (UCB Comedy). Listing several criticisms leveled against the senator, she concluded that people think "Hillary Clinton is a bitch" (UCB Comedy). "Yeah, she is," confirmed Fey, "and so am I, and so is this one here," she said pointing to Poehler (UCB Comedy). "Bitches get stuff done" (UCB Comedy). This celebration bitchiness situates the actresses within a movement to consciously reappropriate the term. For the most part "bitch" has shed its early synonymity with licentiousness, but its contemporary uses still include unsparing indictments of intractability, hostility, and spitefulness. Jo Freeman, feminist advocate and scholar, published "The BITCH Manifesto" in 1968, inaugurating an ideological alliance between the women's liberation movement and cultural reclamations of the term. "A woman," she writes,

> should be proud to declare that she is a Bitch because Bitch is beautiful"… They have loud voices and often use them… They are independent cusses," who "believe they are capable of… anything… They seek their identity strictly through themselves" and through "what they do" (Freeman).

For the last five decades, feminists and popular culture have, for the most part, embraced Freeman's reconception, recognizing reclamations of the term, such as Fey and Poehler's, as importantly feminist.

The comedians, for their own part, conflate bitchiness with their version of bossiness, interpreting both insults as sign of under-appreciated professional conviction and confidence. Amy Poehler, in her memoir, *Yes Please*, says she loves bossy women, writing that "some people hate the word, but for me, a bossy woman is someone is someone to search out and celebrate… someone who cares and commits and is a natural leader." She understands how the phrase can seem like a disparaging way to describe a woman with a determined point of view, but in her opinion, bossy and bitchy both imply diligence (Poehler). If a woman is too self-assured to notice others' denigration, then she's "getting stuff done" (UCB Comedy). This emphasis upon professional confidence and personal contentment bears striking similarities to *Facebook* COO Sheryl Sandberg's neoliberal feminist tactics, popularized in her bestselling advice book, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*. In the book, co-authored by Nell Scovell and published in 2013, Sandberg addresses the dearth of top women executives, advocating that ambitious women "leaning in" to opportunities and aggressively pursue professional advancement even at the risk of appearing unlikable (Sandberg). She similarly contends that contemporary women give up the dream of "having it all," writing that concept flies in the face basic economic laws and common sense (Sandberg). Those laws, according to bell hooks, in "Dig Deep: Beyond *Lean In*," are filtered through Sandberg's privileged white capitalist perspective, resulting in a "trickle-down theory" of female success that assumes having more women at the top of corporate hierarchies will necessarily help all women. Sandberg overlooks the ways in which extreme class differences make it difficult for poor women and women of color to achieve professional success, blanketing

her idealistic advice in an optimism "so affably intense" that the truth is heedlessly obscured (hooks).

Fey and Poehler's feminist assertions in many ways are similar, calling upon young women "to embody more emboldened identities," (McRobbie 256) pursuing of an idea of female success, which hooks and theorist Angela McRobbie, in "Post-feminism and Popular Culture," call improbable. McRobbie, writing in the early 2000s, is considering the timely "circulation of feminist values across… popular culture" in England in the 1990s, speculating that the resurgence of women's issues is responsible for inaugurating an assumed state of feminism (256). Tina Fey and Amy Poehler, at least in terms of humor, are a part of a similar occurrence in the United States, frequently touted as having ended *Saturday Night Live*'s historically male-dominated workplace politics (Murphy 174). They are ubiquitous with the phrase "women in comedy," even joking at a recent event that together they count as a single representative (FeyPoehlerLover). Since leaving *SNL* where they both performed as "Update's" first all-women anchor team, Fey successfully helmed her series, *30 Rock*, and Poehler starred as the idealistic Leslie Knope on *Parks and Recreation*. Both characters are often evoked as feminist: Liz Lemon as the "self-deprecating… everywoman" (Lauzen 108-109) working desperately to "have it all" ("Sandwich Day"), and Leslie Knope as women's bureaucratic champion. Some critics similarly lauded their performances at the Golden Globes, such as Jill Dolan, who wanted to see even more of their gender reversing humor in the 2015 show ("The Golden Globes 2015"). Other critics were more disapproving, criticizing Fey and Poehler for not going far enough (Holmes). They are

emblematic of the convergence between pop culture and feminism, foreboding but also flawed.

In this chapter, I examine Tina Fey and Amy Poehler's feminist embodiment, particularly their performances as hosts at the 2013, 2014, and 2015 Golden Globes awards. I will begin by articulating some of their feminist ideologies, relying upon bell hooks' work in "Dig Deep" and Angela McRobbie's in "Post-feminism and Popular Culture" to expand those carried over from their improvisational training to include more neoliberalist feminist contentions. I will then reckon with some of the critiques leveled again Fey and Poehler's performances, particularly Linda Holmes' in "Television 2015: A Whole Lotta Guys in Ties," analyzing the strengths of their feminist assertions. Finally, I will conduct case study analysis of their performances, closely examining a few of the comedians' most note-worthy jokes and gauging their success according to my own enthusiastic responses. I set myself up a typical Tina Fey and Amy Poehler fan, reading their efforts as an attempt to inject feminist ideologies within popular culture.

"Don't Tell Me What to Do": Bell Hooks and Angela McRobbie

Angela McRobbie, in "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture," is presenting a series of conceptual frames through which concept of post-feminism can be meaningfully engaged (255). Her article "understands post-feminism to refer to an active process by which [the] feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s" are systematically "undermined" by

certain pernicious "elements of contemporary popular culture" (255). It evokes feminism "as that which can be taken into account"—once useful but now obsolete—freeing young women from the "censorious politics" of feminism and calling them into more audacious "ways of being" (McRobbie 255).

In about 1900, she writes, "the representational claims of second wave feminism" became fully integrated into the works of post-colonial feminists, like Spivak, Trinh, and Mohanty, and post-structural feminists, like Butler and Haraway, resulting in a "radical de-naturalizing of the post-feminist body" (McRobbie 256). This body came to represent, according to McRobbie, "a focal point of feminist interest," sublimating former absorption in centralized power blocks such as "the State, patriarchy, [and the] law," producing subjects who were "problematically 'she,' rather than… unproblematically 'we'" (McRobbie 256). McRobbie attributes this shift to the prevailing influence of Michel Foucault, who refocused feminism upon "more dispersed sites, events and instances of power," conceptualizing them as "flows…. convergences and consolidations of talk" (256). This shift is detectable across popular culture where power is remade at various junctures within everyday life, for example, at the juncture between feminism, conceptualizions of conventional feminine success, and individual choice (McRobbie 255).

McRobbie refers to the work of Andrea Stewart, who writing in the early 1990s, was considering "the wider circulation of feminist values across the landscape of popular culture" when she noted that issues central to the formation of the women's movement "like domestic violence, equal pay, and workplace harassment" were suddenly

reintroduced and newly addressed in popular culture (256). Feminist values were also "taken on board within a range of institutions, including law, education… employment and the media," with the achievements and successes of women in these sectors predominantly in the media, seeming to suggest that these institutions were modernizing and staying abreast of developing social change (McRobbie 257). "This is the context," writes McRobbie, in which feminism is acknowledged and "taken into account," presumed to have achieved its desired effect, and therefore, no longer useful or relevant (257).

This feminist disempowerment, she argues, was achieved through processes of historicization and generalization, which portrayed the politics of feminism as not only sorely out of date but also as newly sanctimonious (McRobbie 258). She unpacks the dimensions of popular 1990s Wonder Bra advertisement as an example. The composition of the image, according to McRobbie, "had such a textbook 'sexist ad' dimension" that it would not have been unwarranted to suppose that its creators had some familiarity with feminist critiques of advertising (258). Seeing it, "everyone and especially young people can give a sigh of relief," thinking "thank goodness it's permissible, once again, to enjoy looking at the bodies of beautiful women" (259). There is no exploitation in the image, "there is nothing remotely naïve about the striptease," rather the woman pictured seems to be doing her posing out of choice, and for her own enjoyment (McRobbie 259). The "specter of feminism," therefore, was pointedly evoked only in order for it to be undone (McRobbie 259).

McRobbie further develops this concept of choice, in relation to the new post-feminist subject, building upon Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernshiem's concept of "female individualization" (260). As a result of separating from communities wherein gender roles were predominantly fixed, young women are increasingly called on to invent individualized structures of social class through processes, such a journaling, and career and life planning (McRobbie 260). Women must now choose the kind of life they want to live, making choices in marriage, in personal life, and in work, which gradually increases in significance, compelling individuals into self-conscious and self-reflexive ways of being (McRobbie 261). The titular character from the 2001 film *Bridget Jones' Diary* is the epitome of this post-feminist subject, according to McRobbie, portraying "the whole spectrum of attributes associated with the self-monitoring subject," including keeping a diary, constantly confiding in her friends, reflecting upon her fluctuating weight, and agonizing over finding a suitable life partner (261). She is also deeply uncertain about what the future holds, feeling anew a variety of formerly conservative feminine anxieties now newly palpable given the assumed nature of feminism, for example, the fear of remaining single and alone (McRobbie 261). With Bridget, however, as with contemporary women, the burden of this self-management is painfully apparent (McRobbie 261), signaled by the appeal of popular advice books such as *Lean In*, as well as Tina Fey's *Bossypants* and Amy Poehler's *Yes Please*. These books, with their celebrity authors ostensibly promise to help readers make similarly successful choices, stimulating a belief in unattainable feminine success.

Bell hooks in Dig Deep: Beyond *Lean In*, similarly criticizes proponents of Sheryl Sandberg's book for celebrating it as "a new feminist manifesto," arguing that Sandberg essentializes socioeconomic success into an easy issue of choice. "Anyone," writes hooks, "who acts as though women just need to make the right choices" in order to achieve a comparable amount of success "is refusing to acknowledge the reality" that certain choices allude the socioeconomically and racially underprivileged (hooks). Echoing McRobbie's indictment of the media as strategically involved in this systematic undermining of feminism, hooks asserts that the media, along with Sandberg, is telling women that through "sheer strength of will and staying power" any individual who can work hard enough can achieve corporate and professional success.

Furthermore, *Lean In* rapidly developed into an exclusively millennial source, spurred by the organizations didactic website and by Sheryl Sandberg's sequel, *Lean In for Graduates*. As the site's "for graduates" section explains, the organization offers a growing library of online lectures and videos, focused on topics ranging from leadership to communication skills ("Lean In for Graduates"). They are produced in partnership with Stanford University's Clayman Institute for Gender Studies, which implies that they are structured like college lectures and purport a certain sort of academic authorial credibility. The book's sequel includes new essay, authored by industry experts on topics ranging from finding a first job, to negotiating a starting salary, to listening to your inner voice. These lessons are reinforced on Lean In.org's *Instagram* page, which is clearly curated to appeal to the books young millennial readers with its attractive images of professional and celebrity women, inspirational quotes, and affirmations. Tina Fey and

Amy Poehler are frequently evoked within this youthful virtual space, representing feminist icons to which young women can look up.

Amy Poehler's online community *Smart Girls* is similarly structured with its own *Twitter*, *Pinterest*, and *Instagram* pages, clearly catering to an audience of young, millennial women increasing turning to the Internet for feminist inspiration and community. The implication is that Fey and Poehler, like Sheryl Sandberg, are invested in neoliberal feminist ideologies perhaps to their degradation as hooks' and McRobbie's critiques of the form seem to suggest. It is my contention rather that these ideologies are the progression of those asserted by Viola Spolin in her technique, which Fey and Poehler studied together in Chicago. Furthermore Fey and Poehler's feminist assertions are nuanced and varied, certainly privileging in certain circumstances neoliberal feminist worldviews but worldviews from other forms of feminism. These obvious parallels between their feminist assertions and the ideologies of liberal feminism demonstrate an acute awareness of popular culture, which given the successes of Sandberg and Smart Girls, young women are obviously leaning.

The Conventions of the Golden Globes

During each of their Golden Globes appearances, Tina Fey and Amy Poehler performed within the conventional format of a typical television awards show. Linda Holmes, in "Television 2015: A Whole Lotta Guys in Ties," draws a parallel between the structural arrangement of these events and the ordering of segments in late night talk shows.

According to Holmes, "after long periods in which late night changed very little," the genre on American television has "suddenly gone through a period of personnel" change. "Of the eight slots most commonly at the center of late night gossip (NBC, ABC, and CBS, each at 11:30 and 12:30, plus Comedy Central at 11:00 and 11:30) six [shows] will have host turnover between the beginning of 2014 and the end of 2015" (Holmes). Many critics, including Emily Nussbaum of *The New Yorker*, eagerly anticipated these shifts for providing opportunities for curing "the late-night blahs." "Each year," she writes, "we get a fresh forensic analysis of the minute differences" between late-night hosts, "someone's always the hot young buck. Someone's [always] the egghead," and yet "every show looks identical, as if the format had made the same face… too many time, and got stuck" (Nussbaum). Most shows retained their "monologue-desk piece-guest-guest-musical guest-goodbye" format with a different man at the helm, albeit Trevor Noah, *The Daily Show*'s new host, is a black South African comedian (Holmes). David Kamp, in a recent article for *Vanity Fair*, attempted to spin these relative non-changes into a positive piece about revitalization, unfortunately his article included an astoundingly ironic photograph, depicting the current roster of late night hosts—all male and mostly white—above a caption reading, "Invigorated" (Kamp). This lack of innovation and diversity suggests that the shows' networks, runners, and producers subscribe Dear Abby's 1960s admonition of "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." The popularity of these shows and the frequency of their segment sharing on social media demonstrate that success in late night depends on the excellent execution of set components (Holmes).

Holmes' assertion is that this formulaic composition of conventional and anticipated segments, rearranged into new and interesting configurations, unites the genres of television awards and late-night talk shows. Tina Fey and Amy Poehler, she writes, may be "the biggest successes in hosting in recent years," but all they did at the Golden Globes was stay strictly within a format "that's been used for decades and do it better" than anyone else. Holmes' critique is essentially a reassertion of the common critical refrain that the "master's tools" are inadequate for "dismantling" his house (Lorde 110). Audre Lorde, in "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," challenges the efficacy of academic feminism's reliance upon patriarchal institutions as the genesis for social change. The piece was written in response to Lorde's predominantly negative experience attending and participating in New York University's Institute for the Humanities Conference in 1978. She was invited to comment on "papers dealing with the role of difference within the lives of American women," particularly differences "of race, sexuality, class, and age" (110). Believing that "the absence of these considerations weakens" any "feminist discussion of the personal and political," Lorde was disappointed by the lack of African American and lesbian presenters at the conference (110). "To read this program," she writes, "is to assume that lesbian and black women have nothing to say about existentialism, the erotic, women's culture and silence, developing feminist theory, or heterosexuality and power" (110). She argues that the inability of feminists "to recognize difference as a crucial strength is a failure to reach beyond" patriarchy's first lesson, that deviation is necessarily a sign of weakness (Lorde 112). According to Lorde, participating within the

oppressive structures of patriarchy may temporarily allow feminists to beat the master at his own game, but his tools will never enable them to bring about genuine change (112). Linda Holmes similarly shares Lorde's belief that "old patterns, no matter how cleverly rearranged to imitate progress, still condemn" audiences, participants, and scholars "to cosmetically altered repetitions of the same old exchanges" (114).

Audre Lorde's critique demonstrates the extent to which the concept of using the master's tools has become a long-standing tenet of feminist theory. Adrienne Rich, Lorde's contemporary, wrote in "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" that the act of re-visioning might be a competent compromise, involving "looking back… seeing with fresh eyes," and "entering an old text from a new critical direction" (190). Her essay, on one hand, is a piece of feminist theory, calling for the reinterpretation of classic literary texts, and on the other, an illustrative account of Rich's own journey to feminist self-knowledge. She contends that a metaphoric "specter" of "male judgment" hangs over women writers, creating "problems of contact… problems of language and style," and "problems of energy and survival" (Rich 191). It is a result, not only, of men's predominance in literature but also the result of patriarchal institutions, such as marriage and maternity limiting women's creative freedom (Rich 191). These conventions, according to Lorde, are imbued with a certain amount of cultural authority, which is why women do not dispute them, falsely believing that they are bolstering source of creative support (112). Instead Rich argues that "nothing is too sacred for the imagination," advocating that women writers and scholars develop their own sense of style independent of classic Western literature (190). "Until we can understand the

assumptions in which we are drenched," she writes, "we cannot know ourselves" (Rich, 190). In order to resist patriarchy, therefore, feminist writers must first understand the ways in which its insidious structures have influenced ways of thinking and being. In this sense, feminist scholars and advocates must first take up the institutional tools of their oppressors in order to learn them and comprehend them before setting them aside for more powerful and effective methods.

In the face of such radical re-visioning, of course Tina Fey and Amy Poehler's Golden Globes performances seem to fall short. Their gendered humor does not advocate for an innovation of the self. It does not encourage supporters to use revolutionary techniques to resist gender inequality. And it does not dispute the efficacy of using the master's tools. Fey and Poehler's jokes simply advocate for a constellation of feminist politics. Bell hooks, in fact, criticizes this same failing in Sandberg, writing that her definition of feminism "begins and ends with the notion [of] gender equality… We must understand," urges hooks, "that challenging and dismantling patriarchy is at the core of contemporary [feminism]… necessarily if women and men are to be liberated from out-modeled sexist thinking and actions." It is precisely Sandberg's avoidance of difficult questions," according to hooks, "that empowers her optimism," possibly accounting for another aspect of her prodigious appeal. Tina Fey and Amy Poehler are similarly at the Globes to entertain, taking up the conventions of awards to play with the long-standing sexist conventions of Hollywood.

Articles criticizing the efficacy of their humor, however, such as Linda Holmes', also fail to consider the likely shift in that their content underwent in tone. The Globes

participate within a larger system of formalized entertainment awards created in order to structure projects and performers into elite and non-elite categories. These value estimates influence everything from potential viewership, to franchise merchandising, to future development. The Globes are often cited as a precursor to the Academy Awards, confirming the identities of favorites and setting the critical tone for the rest of the awards season. With the exception of performers John Larroquette and Janine Turner, who hosted the show once in 1995, British comedian Ricky Gervais and his successors, Tina Fey and Amy Poehler are the Globes' only official hosts. Gervais was severely criticized in 2011 for telling jokes that were considered to be too "mean-spirited" (Mychiba). The comedian appeared on *Piers Morgan Tonight* four days later to address the controversy, citing the pressure to innovate as his motivation for the telling jokes. "I'm hosting a party," he said, "a televised industry party," you can't go there and do "flat, broad, anodyne, homogenized," and "reworked material" (qtd in Kauffman 47). Gervais was not invited to return in 2012; instead the Hollywood Foreign Press hired Tina Fey and Amy Poehler to host the show for the next three years. The comedians were likely encouraged by the HFPA to curb direct attacks upon individuals in order to avoid a similar scandal. Fey and Poehler do mock specific Hollywood figures, particularly nominated male actors and directors, but their jokes are qualified by others as symptomatic of a larger issue of gender inequality in Hollywood.

They use humor to construct gender-reversals, exposing the flawed exchanges of meaning between actors as images and their spectators (Dolan 65). Jill Dolan in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* uses women in "pornography and performance" (59) to

discuss the manipulative role of representation "in creating and maintaining social relationships" (16). She writes that while it is crucial in feminist theory "not to conflate sexuality with gender, expressions of sexuality can expose "the operations of gender codes and constructs" involved in shaping representations of the female body (Dolan 63). Heterosexuality, for example, "is naturalized by a dominant theology" and is considered by many as an inherent state of being (Dolan 63). When sexuality is recast as a choice, the authenticity of that construct necessarily becomes suspect (Dolan 63-64). Dolan examines the efficacy of *Eidos'* magazine's attempts to address female objectification by reversing "the traditional roles" of men and women in pornography (64). The magazine billed itself as erotica for women, attempting to reinterpret relationships "between gender and sexual desire by aiming its… content at heterosexual women" instead of men (Dolan 64). Dolan asserts that the effort was ultimately unsuccessful because it "bound" gender representation to the system of ideological difference that gave it its shape in the first place (Dolan, 64). Simply reorganizing a binary opposition so that "the weaker term is placed in the theoretically powerful position does nothing to deconstruct" a dichotomy of power (Dolan 64). Instead gender-reversals expose the mechanisms of this power, charting the operation of ideology "in relaying meanings between images and viewers" (Dolan 64). She praised Fey and Poehler's gender-reversals at the 2015 Globes, on *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* blog, mentioning a number of their jokes, including their jab at Richard Linklater in the opening and their game of "Who Would You Rather?" near its end.

Spanx, Cake, and Bill Cosby: Tina Fey and Amy Poehler Host the Golden Globes

In their 2015 opening, an immaculately styled Fey feigned surprise at hearing that it took two hours of hair and makeup to apply Steve Carell's *Foxcatcher* look. "Just for comparison," she quipped, "it took me three hours today to prepare for my role as human woman" (NBC). Jill Dolan describes this type comedy as "gender reversal," highlighting the obvious disparities between responses to the same sorts of characteristics and labor. Fey affects this astonishment in order to recreate audience reactions to Carell's physical transformation. Andrew O'Hehir for *Salon.com* wrote, "Carell is so convincing, so unrecognizable and so profoundly chilling as," real life coach and convicted murderer, John du Pont, "that you quickly move" from a reaction of surprise to one of pure impression. Matt Patches for *Ign.com*, drawing upon the effectual history of makeup in horror, argued that Carell's appearance and performance carried "the scariest monster movie of the year." Other reviewers described his transformation in language very similar to that of Matthew McConaughey's for *Dallas Buyer's Club*. Phrases such as "shocking" (Fowler) and "impressive" (Romano) were frequently deployed in articles describing the actors' craft, dedication, and skill. Steve Carell described his experience of wearing the makeup as alienating: after spending two hours "in a makeup chair" (Mandell) having various artists apply foundations and prosthetics, Carell did not mingle with his *Foxcatcher* co-stars because his appearance was too "off-putting" (Hiscock).

Matthew McConaughey told *Vanity Fair* in 2014 that once he hit 145 pounds, he started losing his eyesight (Miller).

This frequent conflation between transformation and the labor of acting is due, in part, to the efforts of Oscar-seeking promoters and also, in part, to the legacy of Method acting in this country. Think back through recent awards for instances wherein transformation was listed as proof of merit: Christian Bale's weight loss for *The Fighter* in 2010, or Jared Leto's portrayal of a transgendered woman in *Dallas Buyer's Club*. The various techniques of the Method claim that while the practice of acting should be strenuous, its result must ultimately appear effortless. These factors work to ensure that actors only win awards when they toil, and when that toil results in so seamless, so transformative, and so transcendent a performance that the real life actor is lost somewhere in the endeavor. The cases of Carell and McConaughey demonstrate that Hollywood defines toil as immensely diffuse; it includes as passive an activity as having makeup applied and as active a pursuit as not eating until you, allegedly, go blind. Fey and Poehler's joke not only forces their mediated audience to confront their conditioned notions of acting, but it also forces them to acknowledge that actresses are rarely acclaimed for doing the same sorts of work.

Fey and Poehler wear the physical signs of their daily professional labor on their bodies, performing humor that refuses to oblige its silencing. They are stylishly attired in skin-hugging, designer gowns in 2013 when Fey observes that "*The Hunger Games* was one of the biggest films of the year" and also what she calls "the six weeks" of dieting it took her to fit into her dress (MovieAwardsAll). In a performance of mock

congratulation, Fey and Poehler share a brief high-five before Poehler concludes that *The Life of Pi* is what she's "going to call the six weeks after" she takes her dress off (MovieAwardsAll). Megan Garber, of *The Atlantic*, very recently praised the writings of Fey and Poehler, and of other feminist comedians, for using humor to contest the notion of stardom as a byproduct of natural talent. Young starlets are too often eager to deny the work involved in maintaining their celebrity, choosing instead to endlessly perpetuate a myth of natural beauty in Hollywood (Garber). This myth feeds into essentialized assumptions of gender within the film and television industry, establishing actresses—to whom everyday women are constantly aspiring—as always, already effortless. Fey and Poehler humorously bear their industry scars, admitting not only that they diet but that they very probably pluck, tuck, and squeeze just like everyone else. They empower their female audiences by reveling in the fact that they do not wake up looking like this. A reality that Tina Fey recently emphasized on one of the final episodes of *The Late Show with David Letterman*, when she gifted the retiring host with the "last dress" she would ever wear on a late-night show (Entertainment Tonight).

"Thank you," she says in response to Letterman complimenting her dress, "it's a beautiful dress" (Entertainment Tonight). "You know," she continued "it was not actually lost on me because… I realized, that when you retire, this is it. I'm never going to wear a fancy dress on a talk show again" (Entertainment Tonight). "First of all," she elaborated, "it's very hard work" (Entertainment Tonight). "I don't know if you're aware of this," she said, running her hands down her torso, attracting the audience's eye to her figure, "of the contraptions" going on "under here," but "it's almost medical"

(Entertainment Tonight). “And I’m terrible in heels,” she added, so “I just realized, I dress up like this out of respect for you” (Entertainment Tonight). “I really do,” she concluded (Entertainment Tonight). “So the next time you see me,” on a show, “I’m going to be playing charades in a Slanket” (Entertainment Tonight). And with, Fey, standing up to model the dress, giving a few flattering poses and little saunter walk, announced, “And because of that, and because this is my last time I’m wearing a fancy dress on a talk show and conforming to gender norms—out of respect for you—I want to give you the dress” (Entertainment Tonight). She began reaching for the zipper, signaling Letterman to assist by pulling her hair out of the way, laboriously slipping out of the skintight dress, nonchalantly moving her mic to her bra, and revealing a complex system of support wear and hosiery beneath, including Spanx, a bodysuit, and an incredibly basic plain, nude bra. Kicking the dress aside, she modeled her underwear, unattractively pulling the suit from the creases and crevasses of her body where it had settled, reveling a message on the suit reading, “Bye Dave,” across the front, and “#LastDressEver” on the back. Fey basked in the cheers and the applause, revealing in the display and rejection of her physically confining conformation.

Notions of gender in Hollywood, however, surpass assumptions of the purely superficial. The quality of questions offered to nominated and attending women at award shows suggests that actresses, girlfriends, and wives are encouraged to act gracious, honored, and humbled at their experiences. Elizabeth Plank, for the arts section of *Mic.com*, attempted in 2015 to summarize social media’s response to the treatment of Amal Clooney on the Globes’ red carpet. Plank primarily focuses upon the civil rights

attorney's interactions with the *E! Entertainment* network and its correspondents' failures to ask respectful and thought-provoking questions. Ryan Seacrest only asked Amal Clooney about her gown before presenting her with a "Game Over" t-shirt as a belated wedding present. The shirt was a reference to Amal Clooney's ultimate success at wedding one of Hollywood's most infamous and elusive bachelors. Reactions on social media were swift and fulsome, with viewers criticizing everything from the tastelessness of the gesture to Seacrest's overwhelming journalist negligence (Plank). The content of his questions forced Amal Clooney to answer in very specific ways. Despite the recent inauguration of a social media campaign calling for red carpet reporters to ask actresses more, Seacrest's questions framed Amal Clooney, who is neither an actress nor a celebrity, as a passive and disinterested actor's wife. The incident ignited outrage online for what it asserted about the value of women in Hollywood: that their interests are inherently dissimilar and secondary to those of men.

Tina Fey and Amy Poehler enacted an additional gender reversal in their 2015 opening, contesting precisely this conditioned notion of intellectual difference. Fey quips that she and Poehler have been friends nearly fifty years and that the secret of their long-lasting friendship is "absolutely no overlap" in their taste in men (NBC). They intend to prove it by doing exactly what their audience is already doing at home: playing quick round of "Who would you rather?" Fey starts by asking Poehler to choose between actors, Colin Ferrell and Colin Firth (NBC). Poehler announces her partiality to Ferrell, leaving Fey with the British actor for a "polite amount of time" (NBC). The game continues in this way; back and forth between the comedians as they select men based on

their sexual preference and desire. Amy Poehler, for example, prefers the more recent incarnation of The Hulk because, as everyone knows, she likes it "Ruffalo" (NBC). Fey, on the other hand, believes that Method actors are the superior choice, supposing that they can more credibly "act" like they're into it (NBC). The game concludes with a sportive comparison of director nominees, Richard Linklater and Alejandro Iñárritu, wherein their divergent cinematic styles become characteristic of their sexual skill. Amy Poehler chooses Iñárritu, preferring the un-interrupted, figurative style of his *Birdman* film. "One take," she says, "two hours straight" without "stopping" (NBC). Fey alternatively agrees to take *Boyhood* director, Richard Linklater, for installment encounters "five minutes once a year" (NBC). The comedians' playful sparring reverses conditioned assumptions of gender in Hollywood. Fey and Poehler not only demonstrate that actresses share the same sorts of desires as men, but that they are also equally capable of holding the objects of that desire in derision. Tina Fey achieved a similar effect in 2014 when she declared herself the "Captain" over all the attending men, and in 2015 when she changed out of her gown and into "a Dean Martin-esque" tuxedo (Dolan). The mediated audience is forced reconcile their pleasurable experience of the awards with the reality that Tina Fey and Amy Poehler are asserting it denies. According to their humor, actresses are neither as effortless nor as vapid as the media supposes; they participate in same sorts of labor as men, but are rewarded with unequal praise and retribution.

Hollywood actresses are, of course incredibly privileged. Joanne R. Gilbert, however, in *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*, asserts that

it is precisely humor that transcends the differences between members of similarly marginalized groups. It has the potential to unite its performers and listeners through the collective "unmasking" of cultural hypocrisy (29-30). This is not accomplished through a series of direct and aggressive accusations, but rather through what Gilbert describes as a kind of empathic laughter. Nancy Walker, in *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor in American Culture*, asserts that "a dominant theme in women's humor is how it feels to be a member of a subordinate group in a culture that prides itself" upon the semblance of equality (x). When Amy Poehler, for example, jokingly explains to all "the Hollywood people" in the room that cake is a "fluffy dessert… people eat on their birthdays," and that birthdays "are a thing that people celebrate when they admit that they have aged" (NBC) women laugh because understand the pressures needing to appear young and beautiful in American society. This collective empathy creates a sense of community among those who laugh. It revels that the personal is sometimes powerfully universal. Women in Tina Fey and Amy Poehler's media audience see semblances of their own gendered inequality repurposed within this seemingly innocuous Hollywood humor. They begin reframing comedians' jokes, establishing themselves as the subject: Why am I not paid an equal wage? Do I not put in the same sort of effort? Why do men trivialize my identity? And finally, why is any of this funny?

It's funny because humor has a way of implying rather than asserting that something is inherently dissatisfying. Tina Fey and Amy Poehler did not shy away from the controversy of Bill Cosby at the 2015 Golden Globes. The punch line came at the end of an "absurd" and "jarring non-sequitur" that worked on many levels to indict the

comedian for the thirty-five accounts of sexual assault leveled against him (Kornhaber). It began with Amy Poehler saying, "In *Into the Woods*, Cinderella runs from her prince, Rapunzel is thrown from a tower for her prince, and Sleeping Beauty just thought she was getting coffee with Bill Cosby" (NBC). The attending audience immediately gasped as the subject matter became apparent. Amy Poehler looked directly into the camera and gave a small, unsmiling, disdainful shrug. Tina Fey continued, speculating through a typically exaggerated impression of comedian, what he might say to address the allegations. "No, Tina," interrupted Amy. "That's not right." Sarah Miller, for *Time* magazine, remembers in this moment thinking that joke would end a kind of "faux debate about the appropriateness of the subject." Instead, Poehler picked up the impression again, offering her own spoof of Cosby in an attempt to top Fey's. That their end result was not to ignite a conversation about whether or not it was right to attack Bill Cosby, but to figure out which way was best demonstrates the same sort callous consideration one might image he gave victims. Spencer Kornhaber, in "The Case for the Cosby Joke," describes the effort as a rape joke with a purpose, "a statement of support" for accusers who have been maligned out of misplaced nostalgia. "To have ignored the accusations against Cosby at Hollywood's most irreverent event, would have been to surround his alleged crimes with even more silence" (Miller). Instead, Tina Fey and Amy Poehler mocked him in a way that was familiar, challenging audiences to develop a discomfort with the ways in which he used to be lauded.

The overwhelmingly positive responses of audiences, critics, and scholars to Tina Fey and Amy Poehler's Golden Globes appearances demonstrate that their feminist

humor had a significant cultural affect. Popular media sources published numerous critiques and reviews. Social media users tweeted, tagged, and re-posted the event into infamy. And the self-described representatives of women in comedy, introduced new audiences to feminist comedy. They demonstrated not only the ability of humor to advocate for women in marginalized situations, but also the ability of that same humor, if it's remarkably well done, to appeal to vast audiences. That so many shared in the laughter means that so many were in on the joke. Women's inequality is not a funny thing, but the fact that Tina Fey and Amy Poehler have build successful comedy careers advocating the fact, kind of is.

Fey and Poehler's Golden Globes performances, therefore, had their weaknesses but overall can be viewed as successes, creating affective feminist communities through the humor of shared experiences. That experience, most predominately, was the pleasure of fandom, of entertainment, and of popular culture, emphasizing the satisfaction at seeing oneself or one's aspiration reflected back at you. Of course, both women attending and at home can laugh at the joke about cake, knowing that each of them comprehend the oppressions of popular beauty standards, but they can also laugh at the absence of performing women on screen and degradation within the media. Fans, like myself, see themselves reflected in their favorites; they feel as if the women understand them and they lead similar lives. Their oppression then becomes our own, manifesting in the mutual frustration of not being represented. These feelings are reproduced in the sketches of Amy Schumer, particularly her parody of the film *12 Angry Men*, which takes on contemporary enactments of the male gaze.

CHAPTER IV

INSIDE THE FEMINISM OF AMY SCHUMER: INTERPRETING THE COMEDIAN'S SKETCH COMEDY POLITICS

The comedy sketch, "12 Angry Men Inside Amy Schumer," begins with a beleaguered Dennis Quaid, parodying the role of the judge, stating that "the defendant" on trial "is accused of a heinous crime" ("12 Angry Men Inside"). "You gentleman of the jury," he listlessly concludes, "are facing a grave responsibility" ("12 Angry Men Inside"). In Sidney Lumet's *12 Angry Men*, that "grave responsibility" (*12 Angry Men*) is deciding the fate of a young teenage boy accused of brutally murdering his father. The parodying charge leveled against Amy Schumer, in the *Inside Amy Schumer* sketch, is that of being audaciously unattractive on television.

Calling deliberations to order, the jury's foreman requests that the members raise their hands if they think that "Amy Schumer is not hot enough" to be on television ("12 Angry Men Inside"). As in the cinematic original, this preliminary vote results in eleven to one in favor of guilt. Audiences in both instances, privy to the jurors' private conversations, know that they already presuppose their defendants' culpability. Due to their presuppositions and preoccupations, the jurors are immediately incensed when the vote is determined to be nonunanimous. They fiercely demand that the dissenter, Juror No. Eight, account for his wayward view. In the *Inside Amy Schumer* sketch, he offers no explanation, simply saying that he thinks she "might be hot enough" ("12 Angry Men Inside"). In response to their protests and to their stalwart indictments of guilt, he

rationalizes that it is "not easy" for him to raise his hand "and end a girl's life without talking about it first" ("12 Angry Men Inside"). Juror No. Twelve frustratingly exhales, exclaiming, "What do you mean end her life?" ("12 Angry Men Inside"). "Well her appearance," responds Juror No. Eight, "so her life," implying that Amy Schumer's professional success is contingent upon her relative physical attractiveness. Juror No. Eight's declaration, in the sketch, mirrors that of his cinematic counterpart, similarly declaring, "It's not easy for me to raise my hand and send a boy off to die" without discussing it (*12 Angry Men*). Through his incisive efforts, the others eventually admit that their votes are motivated by "deep-seeded personal prejudices" and "perceptual biases" based upon the defendant's race and class ("Filmsite Movie Review"). Schumer's parody of the film mounts a similarly scathing indictment, not of America's casual and continuing racism, but of its sexism.

Many critics noted as much, lauding the sketch as feminist and celebrating it as Schumer's most clever and astute. Kate Knibbs, of the *AV Club*, wrote that the sketch was a furiously funny "evisceration of double standards and patriarchal arrogance." Kevin Fallon, of *The Daily Beast*, asserted that the sketch perfectly exhibited its star's "unparalleled ability to be brashly feminist" while throwing "middle fingers at cultural norms." Schumer, for her own part, encourages this politicization of her comedy, proclaiming in interviews and at public appearances that she is proudly feminist. Some members of the contemporary movement, however, are uncomfortable with Schumer's controversial representations of herself in public, her feminist fame, and her white, cisgendered, heteronormative, monosexual brand of comedy. Regardless, many media

outlets, especially feminist outlets, have hailed her as a bright, new comedy star, promulgating a political message more radical than her feminist comedy predecessors.

In lieu of these contentions and in the wake of her wildly successful year, Amy Schumer's comedic articulation of feminism warrants scrutiny. In this chapter, I examine her sketch "12 Angry Men Inside Amy Schumer from sketch series *Inside Amy Schumer*, analyzing the ways in which Schumer brings humor to bear upon feminism's theoretical founding in psychoanalytics and spectatorship, and also upon its enduring concern with harassment and professional double standards. First I situate Schumer contextually within popular culture, comedy, and feminist comedy, particularly in relation to Jon Stewart and the role of the internet. Next I read Schumer's "12 Angry Men" sketch as a feminist political statement, using Laura Mulvey's analysis of classic Hollywood cinema. As young women increasingly place aspirational stock in branded, feminist role models, such Schumer, those comedians' articulations begin to influence contemporary conceptions, simultaneously impacting and illuminating their intended audiences' gendered interests and concerns.

Jon Stewart, Comedy, and the Internet

Amy Schumer's emergence coincided with several key transitional moments in pop culture and feminist comedy. Emily Nussbaum, in "The Little Tramp: The Raucous Feminist Humor of *Inside Amy Schumer*," writes that when her series debuted on Comedy Central in 2013, Schumer was flying mysteriously under audiences' radars.

Despite a string of recent successes—finishing fourth on NBC's *Last Comic Standing* (2007), releasing her debut stand-up album (2011), and staring in her own Comedy Central special entitled, *Mostly Sex Stuff* (2012) ("Amy Schumer Biography")—Schumer was not attracting viewers (Nussbaum). Her sketches were, however, getting unusually high hit rates online (Nussbaum). Megan Garber in "How Comedians Became Public Intellectuals" contends that this phenomenon is part of a recent trend in comedy. She argues that changes in comedians' content, as well as in the ways their audiences were watching material, established comedians as new critical, cultural authorities. Garber admits that the point of comedy has always been some kind of productive subversion—usually deconstructing institutions' and populations' avoidances of certain cultural taboos—but that recent efforts are increasingly ameliorative (Garber). "Comedy has ceased," she writes, "to be the province of angsty… possibly drug-addled white guys," joking "about their needy girlfriends and airplane food," increasingly becoming the province of women and minorities, answering "questions about power dynamics… privilege, and cultural authority" (Garber). Garber conveniently overlooks, however, the lambasting efforts of earlier countercultural comedians, such as George Carlin and Lenny Bruce, to make this assertion, ignoring the ways in which their comedy subverted oppressive culture norms. Contemporary, social media-minded comedians, she concludes, are more ideologically affecting.

Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert are obviously the promulgators of her observed comedic trend, functioning as adjuncts to the news, politics, and popular culture (Garber). David Sims, in "Jon Stewart's Remarkable Farewell," argues that when

Stewart took over *The Daily Show* in 1999, the series was nothing more than Comedy Central's take on classic late-night television. "Stewart refocused the show on news and politics," allowing his correspondents and contributors—all up-and-coming comedians like Steve Carell (1999-2005), John Oliver (2006-2013), and Kirsten Schaal (2008)—to set their topics and shape their personas (Sims). This created comedic satire that "felt less like scripted banter and more like [an] ongoing dialogue between Stewarts' sane but exasperated host" and the crazy "pundit world" (Sims). Stewart genuinely believed, according to Sims, that the media's pitting of right verses left was harming the country, creating sensationalist news and driving an idealistic wedge between politicians, bureaucrats, and citizens. His rants shook viewers out of their reverie, grabbed them by the lapels, and demanded they reconsider the messages of cable news networks (Sims). Over the years, younger audiences began relying upon Stewart as "some strange blend of moral polestar and media truth-teller" (Sims), establishing him as a kind of ethical and intellectual guide (Garber). This status supports Garber's overarching contention that Stewart's news-based comedy was elucidating and newsworthy, "producing endless streams and aggregated articles" online (Kakutani), but that it was not actually news. Rather it performed an auxiliary function, stimulating debates in other news sites. Her analysis, however, overlooks one of the key characteristics of Stewart's comedic persona: that he was considered incredibly trustworthy.

That dependability was tri-fold, emanating from the investigative nature of his content, feeding back into his perceived cultural authority, and manifesting in a kind of social responsibility, which he continues to maintain even after retiring from the show.

In 2008, the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism "studied the content of *The Daily Show* for an entire year (2007)," attempting to place it into some kind of discernable news/media context (Pew Research Center: Journalism and Media Staff). They determined—rather unremarkably—that the show's purpose was satirical rather than reportorial, unselfconsciously blending fact and fantasy and documentary-style clip montaging into deconstructions of media manipulations (Pew Research Center: Journalism and Media Staff). At times, however, they admitted, *The Daily Show* was about more than comedy, performing a discursively journalistic function, namely getting people to think critically "about the public square" (Pew Research Center: Journalism and Media Staff). That Stewart accomplished this analytic prompting through a series of pseudo-comedic, investigative exposés made him a journalist, according to Michiko Kakutani, the so-called watchdog of the watchdogs. In "Is Jon Stewart the Most Trusted Man in America," Kakutani describes *The Daily Show* as "a genuine cultural and political force," propelling its host to acclaim as one of the "most admired" journalists in America. Stewart's comedy was additionally given weight by his own personal convictions; his impassioned on-air rants were frequently attempting to bring about changes that he desired (Sims). His inclusion of these personally significant causes was also meaningful for audiences as his causes became, or already were, their causes, establishing him as their discursive representative. Stewart has continued to nurture this ameliorating persona even after leaving the show, advocating as recently as December 2015 for the James Zadroga Act, which provides healthcare for the first responders of 9/11 (McFarland). The unintended consequence of his politicizing, however—similarly

and acutely felt by Amy Schumer and her feminist comedy contemporaries—is that followers become intensely solicitous of the comedian's every statement and move.

This causal accountability is partly the consequence of Stewart's ameliorating legacy and partly the consequence of social media becoming the secondary medium of comedy. Regardless of where jokes originate—on Comedy Central sketch shows, on late-night television couches, at comedy clubs, on podcasts or Twitter feeds—they all end up living "eventually, and probably immediately," online (Garber). Entire shows are quickly segmented and rapidly dispersed, ensuring that their creators' most intriguing, entertaining, and thought provoking content reaches audiences immediately. Those same segments are then re-posted and shared on social media, becoming intimately intertwined within the newly comprehensible ways individuals are defining themselves to others. In a recent study conducted by *The New York Times*' Customer Insight Group, entitled "The Psychology of Sharing: Why Do People Share Online?," researchers concluded that there are "six primary motives for sharing" ("The Psychology of Sharing"), each broadly related the maintenance of personal relationships (Customer Insight Group). Individuals demonstrate their intimate knowledge of acquaintances, for example, by publicly introducing them to "valuable and entertaining content" on social media (Customer Insight Group). They solidify personal relationships by connecting them with social causes and concerns (Customer Insight Group), nourishing bonds with the synthesizing force of shared sentiment. In the process, individuals gain the self-satisfaction of having personally defined themselves, sharing pieces of information that reinforce the image they like to present to the rest of the world (Customer Insight

Group). Posting a politically influenced or issue-based comedy segment, such as one of Stewart's or Schumer's, not only implies that the poster is in on the joke—therefore culturally attentive and well-formed—but that he or she shares the same opinion as the comedian. Their jokes, in some cases, stand in for those of viewers, more indicting, rehearsed, and articulate than their own self-consciously pronounced beliefs. When comedians are perceived to have erred, therefore, they betray their supporters' firmly held trust, indicting them for having so grievously misbestowed their favor.

As Emily Nussbaum notes, becoming a successful comedian can be risky because being on a pedestal means that anyone can critically and metaphorically look up your skirt. These sorts of censures are dissimilar from those leveled against a preponderance of comedians—who do, on occasion, drastically and critically err—but specifically leveled against those comedians, who, like Amy Schumer, have attached themselves to particular social movements. Nussbaum is describing a kind of cautionary diligence, present in several long-standing movements, which can be readily redeployed against new, presumably divergent interventions. As feminism, for example, remains ongoing, its intentions are increasingly difficult to embody. "It's happened again and again, to the new wave of female" television creators, Nussbaum calls "the Tinas, the Mindys, and the Lenas," who are measured not only against the quality of their art, but against the competence of their feminism. When it is determined that for one reason or another they do not adequately measure up—imperfectly embodying the vast, multifarious spectrum of contemporary feminism—they are slandered by its members as either fraudulent or insufficient. Amy Schumer is an especially polarizing case lauded by

some feminists as "subliminally powerful" (Lewis) and "perfectly of-the-moment" (Sciortino) on one hand and "unenlightened" (Thériault) and misguided on the other. Katie Halper's piece for *The Nation* summarizes the issue best, asking whether Amy Schumer's *Trainwreck* is "sexist or new feminist?" Her analysis is not particularly astute consisting primarily of a series of comedians' takes, but her impetus for writing the article is, encapsulating the dearth of feminist issues relating to Schumer.

Halper's article is tuned into Schumer's relevance, posing a pertinent inquiry into the nature, context, and tone of her feminist embodiment. From the fateful moment she jokingly tripped and fell in front of Kim Kardashian and Kanye West at the *TIME* 100 Gala, to her provocative, semi-nude pose on the cover of *Entertainment Weekly*, to her *Glamour* acceptance speech, Amy Schumer has spun her many comedic escapades into feminist statements. In an interview with *Glamour* Magazine's Kim Caramele, in July of 2015, Schumer said that becoming a new feminist icon was very unexpected because she's never tried to be a feminist. "I just am," she said, "it's innately inside of me. I have no interest in trying to be the perfect feminist, but I do believe feminists are in good hands with me" (Caramele). Many critics stringently disagree, contending that Schumer is unnecessarily bawdy, carless, and insensitive to the sway of her feminist comedy rhetoric. Rachel Charlene Lewis, of *Lumen* magazine, for example, attributes Schumer's celebrity to the current "lib-pop… world," which she says creates a safer and more money soaked space for certain feminist comedians. In the article she references a systematic rift within the community dividing the interests of Schumer's fans—white, cisgendered, and heteronormative—from those she largely excludes from her comedy.

Lewis portrays the comedian, therefore, as merely playing at feminism, adversely diminishing the hardships of non-binary, non-white individuals.

Anne Thériault in "Amy Schumer Isn't as Feminist as the Internet Thinks" takes Lewis' assertion a step further, recounting a instance from early 2015 wherein Schumer, caught in the midst of her *Trainwreck* press tour, was forced to apologize for an earlier joke. The incident started when *Guardian* contributor, Monica Heisey, criticized Schumer for joking that all Latino men were rapists. Schumer initially attempted to defend the joke, arguing that it was her job, as a comedian, to make people feel uncomfortable and that the joke was intended as an indictment of the so-called "dumb white girl" (Howard). "I joke about things" that are risky, she said, "and that's okay. Stick with me and trust that I am joking… I enjoy playing the girl who, from time to time, says dumb things." Amidst mounting criticism, however, Schumer was forced to apologize, saying:

> Once I realized that I had more eyes and ears on me, and [that] I had influence, I stopped telling jokes like that onstage. I am an evolving artist. I am taking responsibility and I hope I haven't hurt anyone… I apologize if I did (qtd. in Howard)

For her own part, Heisey chastised Schumer for possessing such a shockingly large blind spot about race, noting that for such a keen observer and astute social satirist, the joke was unexpected. Thériault agreed, writing, that on the surface, it's easy to see why Amy Schumer has such broad, affective appeal—"she's pretty and blond and can be incisive

and funny"—but the truth is that many of her jokes are not "as enlightened as they seem."

Their critiques, though reasonably wary and relatively shrewd, do overlook the fact that it is far more professionally damning to be accused of being racist in the US than it is of being sexist. In March of 2015, for example, Stephen Colbert was publically shamed for posting an offensive tweet to *The Colbert Report*'s official page that read: "I am willing to show #Asian community I care by introducing the Ching-Chong-Ding-Dong Foundation for Sensitivity to Orientals or Whatever" (qtd. in Stedman). James Hibberd from *Entertainment Weekly* writes that the joke was clearly contextual, originating in a segment mocking Redskins football owner, Dan Snyder, "for responding to complaints about his team's [insulting] name by announcing" that he would create a foundation "to help Native Americans." The tweet was intended as an utterance from Colbert's ultra-conservative comedic television persona, mocking in a style similar to Stewart's the conservative media's tendency to laud racist news ("Stephen Colbert Accused of Racist Joke"). Hibbard notes that viewers felt either one of two ways about the incident: that the joke was a piece of in-character satire intended to skewer racism, or that it was an offensive quip unnecessarily reliant upon a stereotype ("The #CancelColbert Defense").

Their reactions, sampled in Hibberd's article, hint at what the incident became about online: one in a number of subsequent instances challenging comedy's presumed cultural infallibility. One commentator on *Twitter* wrote, that "when satire becomes as offensive and [as] hurtful as the thing" being satirized, it ceases to be humorous, simply

promulgating further cultural injustice (qtd. in "Stephen Colbert Accused of Racist Joke"). Another noted, that "good humor punches at the powerful," while "lazy humor relies" upon the weak… Apologize [Steven Colbert] and promise to do better" (qtd. in "Stephen Colbert Accused of Racist Joke"). Shortly after this comedic controversy, a similarly polarizing incident ignited fury online as *The Daily Show*'s Trevor Noah was also accused of being racist on *Twitter*. *Vulture*'s Dee Lockett wrote that just a day after being named as Stewart's successor on the show, the comedian's *Twitter* history was unceremoniously exhumed and reposted online, purportedly containing sexist and anti-Semitist content. One post from 2011, written in the voice of "fat chicks everywhere," read, "Oh yeah, the weekend! People are going to get drunk [and] think I'm sexy" (qtd. in Lockett). Another from 2009 read, "[I] almost bumped a Jewish kid crossing the road. He didn't look… but I still would have felt bad [hitting him] in my German car!" (qtd. in Lockett). Several famous and established comedians quickly leapt to Noah's defense, claiming not only that his content was mild, but that viewers' critiques were endemic of a larger shift within American culture. Comedian Patton Oswalt, for example, alleged that comedy had become unnecessarily politically correct in response to individuals' increased citation of dormant "trigger warnings" and accumulated microaggressions (Feeny). Chris Rock announced that he would no longer play college campuses because, as he claimed, "they're too controversial" (Flanagan). Jerry Seinfeld echoed that assertion, saying that while he still plays colleges, he does so against the better advice of his contemporaries (Flanagan). Regardless of their defensive posturing, however, the truth of the matter is that non-comedic public figures are fired for uttering racist

statements all the time. Stephen Colbert and Trevor Noah both managed to keep their jobs. Stewart even interceded on behalf of Noah, urging his audience to give the comedian another chance (Duboff). "I know that there was a large kerfuffle on *Twitter*," he said, "but I can say… without hesitation, [that] Trevor Noah will earn your trust and respect… just as I earned your trust and respect" (qtd. in Duboff).

In both instances Comedy Central was also compelled to respond, echoing the prolific responses of their star comedians. In 2012, however, when host Daniel Tosh similarly erred, network executives notably did not respond (Hibberd). The incident occurred in July when Tosh, performing at a Los Angeles comedy club, was heckled by a woman in the audience for telling a joke about rape (Bassist). The comedian reportedly responded saying, "Wouldn't it be funny if that girl was raped by five guys… like right now?" (Bassist). Elissa Bassist, in "Why Daniel Tosh's 'Rape Joke' at the Laugh Factory Wasn't Funny," notes that Tosh did manage to compose a "poorly capitalized retort," posting on *Twitter* that the point he was making, before being heckled, was that "there are awful thing" that happen in the world but that "you can still make jokes about them" (Bassist). Comedy Central did not respond likely believing—as defectors prophesied on social media—that the controversy would adversely affect the network. Tosh's series, however, remained uncancelled and its star eventually lauded for a igniting contentious but necessary debate (Strecker). In hindsight, the networks' responses mirror that of the American publics', tolerant in some instances of misogynistic humor but never of racist content.

Twelve Gazing Men: Amy Schumer's Sketch Comedy Intervention

Amy Schumer's "12 Angry Men" sketch is a scathing indictment of such complacent equanimity, censuring television viewers—specifically men—for tolerating, and in some cases disseminating, sexist content. In one particularly insightful moment, Juror No. One announces that even after voting sixteen more times, they were still hopelessly hung at nine to three in favor of Amy Schumer ("12 Angry Men Inside"). "I'm willing to listen to your arguments," Juror No. Four frustratingly admits, but "I still don't have a reasonable chub" ("12 Angry Men Inside"). The phrase, in the sketch, stands in for the concept of reasonable doubt, which is cited in the original film as cause to acquit (*12 Angry Men*). The instillation of that doubt is how Juror No. Eight, in both iterations, manages to convince the others of the defendant's innocence, or in the case of Amy Schumer, of the defendant's attractiveness.

In this instance, Juror No. Eight, suddenly inspired Four's reignited skepticism, asks him if he always wears his glasses when he watches TV in bed. Hearing that he does not, Juror Eight retrieves a rather large image of Schumer from the head of the room, displaying it at a distance equal to Four and his television at home. "Take a look at her now," he prompts, "what do you think?" ("12 Angry Men Inside"). Four takes a moment to evaluate Schumer, appraising her so-called "Cabbage Patch-like" features, eventually concluding that he would still pass on her ("12 Angry Men Inside"). "Okay, fine," responds Juror No. Eight unfazed, "now take your glasses off" ("12 Angry Men Inside"). As he does so, Eight prompts him with another incisive question, asking,

"When you're" lying in bed at night, "do you drink?" ("12 Angry Men Inside"). "Every night until I blackout," sys Four, "what of it?" ("12 Angry Men Inside"). "So you're laying in bed drunk," Eight continues ("12 Angry Men Inside"). "You don't have your glasses on, so some of her flaws are softened… you're just seeing a general blondness" with presumably attractive features, am I right? ("12 Angry Men Inside"). "Presumably," responds Four ("12 Angry Men Inside"). "So if you left your glasses off, isn't it possible that you" might consider her mildly attractive? ("12 Angry Men Inside"). "I would," Four responds shocked, "I do have a reasonable chub" ("12 Angry Men Inside").

This answer induces a wildly impassioned response from Juror No. Three, who promptly begins shouting, "This doesn't mean anything! I got perfect eyesight and she never stops looking like John C. Reilly to me!" ("12 Angry Men Inside"). His comments are endemic of the other jurors', denigrating Schumer for possessing a less than culturally ideal figure and a set of non-conventional facial features. Juror No. Ten memorably describes her as "built like a lineman," with an imperfect ass that make him furious ("12 Angry Men Inside"). "When I was her age," he argues, "girls felt lucky if you winked at them and let them make you a tuna melt" ("12 Angry Men Inside"). "Now they all think they deserve TV shows," exclaims Juror No. Three, like that "Mindy nightmare," or the "Lena-girl Holocaust hour" ("12 Angry Men Inside"). "Let me ask you a question," he prompts, "where's Megan Fox's TV show?" ("12 Angry Men Inside"). Several of the jurors assent, agreeing that Amy Schumer is just another example of "an average-looking chick, who watched too much *Top Model*, [and] now…

thinks she belongs" on the cover of a magazine ("12 Angry Men Inside"). Their comments are characteristic of those frequently launched against Schumer, Dunham, and Kaling on social media, criticizing their aberrant weight and physical appearances. Schumer's incisive incarnations parody those viewer reactions, demonstrating the extent to which society's—specifically heterosexual men's—preferences in performing women are primordial and overwhelmingly aesthetically indulged.

Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," classifies this aesthetic indulgence as the "determining male gaze," contending that the visual and narrative conventions of Hollywood film reflect, reveal, and play upon patriarchy's socially established interpretations of sexual difference (6). She refers to the manifestation of these differences as "the paradox of phallocentrism," depending upon "image of the castrated woman" as both an ordering and meaningful force in the world (Mulvey 6). Women's function within patriarchal society, she writes, is two-fold, symbolizing the threat of castration by physically lacking a penis and raising children to participate within the phallocentric symbolic order (6). Once this has been achieved, a women's meaning in the process is at an end, lasting only "into the world of law and language" as memory that oscillates between "maternal plentitude" and neglectful lack (Mulvey 6). Sigmund Freud, for example, in his "Lecture XXXIII" on "Femininity," asserts that "girls hold their mother[s] responsible for their lack or penis," refusing to forgive them for putting them at a disadvantage (124). That disadvantage, according to Mulvey, is living perpetually as the mere bearer and not the maker of meaning, bound

"by symbolic order… and through linguistic command" to the silence of signifying a "male Other" (6).

Jacques Lacan introduces this concept of an other in his *Feminine Sexuality*, theorizing that, for the subject, another person can represent a desire to make good on his or her own fundamental loss (Rose 32). According to Jacqueline Rose, in the second "Introduction," Lacan's subject is "always constituted through language" in a series of stages based upon the theorist's "idea of a fiction" (30-31). In the originating mirror stage, for example, Lacan's subject comes to terms with his or her flawed mirrored image, recognizing the surface's "apparent smoothness and totality" as a myth (Rose 30). This moment signals the subject's location of him or herself in an outside order, specifically in language, in which he or she will henceforth participate (Rose 31). Identity continues to shift from there, speaking the loss the loss behind the subject's "first moment of symbolization," when he or she initially realized that something might be missing (Rose 32). "When a child asks for something of it's mother, that loss will persist over and above anything which she can possibly give, or say, in reply" (32). "Demand," Rose continues, "always bears on something other than the satisfaction which it calls for, and each time" that demand is only answered by the satisfaction of needs then that something other is relegated to a space of impossibility (32). That impossibility creates desire, which in turn, fuels an unerring belief in "wholeness," the attainment of which would provide the subject with certainty, knowledge, and truth (Rose 32). "When the subject addresses" that desire outside of him or herself in another,

then that other becomes a fantasy, representing the subject's dream of a complementary and fulfilling opposite (Rose 32-33).

Lacan assigns human sexuality to this "area of instability," conceiving of each sex as standing in for what is inherently lacking in the other (Rose 33). Within this process, women are "constructed as an absolute category," serving to guarantee the unification of the signified male subject (Rose 47). Lacan's theory moves away Marxism's process of exchange, which conceives of women as mere patriarchal objects, claiming instead that women represent the phallus, the ultimate signifying object of patriarchal masculinity (Rose 47). It is for the want of a phallus and for the want of being the symbolic representation of the phallus that women expect to be desired, according to Lacan, and men to be pleased (84). Mulvey argues that this linguistic sexual imbalance is significantly present in mainstream film; what she calls a beauty in its rendering of the frustration women experience under the "phallocentric order" (6).

She asserts that cinema is split between active male performers and passive female performers, visually and narratively catering to the primordial scopophilic desires of heterosexual men (Mulvey 9). Freud in his *Three Essays on Sexuality* initially conceived of scopophilia as a non-erotogenic developmental instinct wherein children, attempting to understand their own physicality and instincts, subject others to a curious and controlling gaze (Mulvey 8). Despite his platonic characterization of the concept, however, scopophilia continues to exist as the erotic basis for pleasurable looking and regarding individuals as sexualized, objectified others (Mulvey 8). Mulvey asserts that cinema intentionally plays upon this "voyeuristic fantasy," portraying "a hermetically

sealed world" that unwinds indifferently to the presence of an audience (Mulvey 8). That indifference, combined together with the extreme darkness of the theater and the brightness on the screen, promote a sense of separation that gives the spectator the illusion of looking in on a private world (Mulvey 8). The conventions of film also focus upon aspects of the human body, satisfying a innate, narcissistic fascination with likeness and recognition that is founded in Lacan's mirror phase (Mulvey 8). Mulvey argues that "quite apart from the extraneous similarities between screen and mirror," cinema constructs structures of fascination strong enough to allow" audience members to temporarily let go of their egos whilst they are simultaneously reinforced (9). Cinema also produces "ego ideals" through the star system, framing both the star's screen presence and stories as complex performances of similarity and difference (Mulvey 9).

These conventions are not innately gendered, according to Mulvey, but were made so by the world's patriarchal sexual imbalance, resulting in the projection of heterosexual men's voyeuristic and narcissistic fantasies upon the performing bodies of actors. Men are active in cinema, forwarding the story and making things happen, while women are passive, objectified to connoting a so-called "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey 9-10). The presence of a woman on film freezes the flow of action, forcing a spectacular moment of erotic contemplation wherein her physical presence provokes something stirring within the protagonist (Mulvey 10). Spurred to action, the man continues to carry the story without distraction, representing and bearing the power of the signified male spectator (Mulvey 10). The spectator identifies with the main male protagonist as his "screen surrogate," satisfying his scopophilic need to control by channeling the

character's profound sense of omnipotence (Mulvey 10). Thus male movie stars are styled to be glamorous, intended to represent male spectators' "more perfect, more complete, and more powerful" ideal self, while female movie stars are styled to be merely sexually attractive (Mulvey 10).

Mulvey's examples of these women, "from pin-ups to striptease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley," all encompass performances intended to hold the voyeuristic male look, implying a long-established expectation of not only physical allure but also, importantly, of silence. Women are meant to be seen and not heard in cinema, an assumption that Amy Schumer disrupts in her television sketch. Although existing in and referring to an alternative medium, television comedy is similarly structured, predominantly indulging the tastes and preferences of male audiences. Caryn Murphy, for example, in "'Is This the Era of Women?' *SNL*'s Gender Politics in the New Millennium" argues that the show's frenzied workplace structure supported a culture that excluded and marginalized women, fostering a historically male-dominated workplace (174). Building upon Doug Hill's and Jeff Weingrad's claims, in *Saturday Night: A Backstage History of Saturday Night Live*, Murphy asserts that the show's "rigorous production schedule" depended upon sketches initially succeeding in the writer's room wherein a majority of judges were men (175). As a result, women's sketches did not make it on the air and women performers were forced to play secretary and receptionist parts (Hill and Weingrad 245). This process became entrenched, allowing a select number of male entertainers to dictate the show's content, shaping audiences' perceptions of women comedians. The majority of Comedy Central's shows are

similarly structured, presuming a predominantly male audience and catering to their specific presumed tastes. A recent article from *The New York Times* proves as much, summarizing a network executives' comment that the channel chases its fans not the other way around (Carter). Thus Comedy Central, like *Saturday Night Live*, encourages and conditions the idealistic male gaze.

Amy Schumer's comedy, however, is notably boisterous contesting the gaze's implied preference for feminine silence. It is that quality, as well as her non-conventional appearance, that lands her on trial in the sketch, usurping the place of the traditionally male protagonist and disrupting male viewers' ability to indulgently gaze. As Juror No. Ten unceremoniously summarizes, "no women are funny, but if you have to listen to them blab, they better at least be hot" ("12 Angry Men"). Schumer is attractive but not specifically in the ways that Mulvey specifies, neither styled nor displayed "for strong visual and erotic impact" (9). Rather her sketches frequently show her behaving bawdily, shoving cheese burgers in her mouth to seem like a chick "who can hang" ("Chicks Who Can Hang"), and taking her make-up off to see if she can go without. Her body is portrayed as encompassing those corporeal realties, which Julia Kristeva characterizes as abject, typically abandoned in usual television comedies. In one sketch, for example, entitled "Milk, Milk Lemonade," Schumer satirizes societies' sexual preoccupation with women's posteriors, emphasizing the area's additional scatological function. Thus male viewers, like the jurors, respond misogynistically, believing that Schumer has violated some aesthetic standard to which they have been culturally conditioned.

Their disparaging comments, which Schumer actually sourced and rewrote for the sketch, importantly reveal the casual and subtle harassment of the gaze, forcing performing women to submit to a professional double standard. Male comedians, such as Kevin James—who is hilariously referenced in the sketch as appropriately unattractive because he always has hot women standing around him—are not valued because of their appearances but because of the quality of their content, while women comedians—if they are valued at all—are valued for both. Thus an aberrant actress, such as Schumer, not only have to contend with male viewers criticizing her comedy as unfunny or trivial because they cannot project their egos onto her feminine form, but also with male viewers criticizing her body as substandard because they are not physically aroused. Feminism in Schumer's estimation, therefore, is ongoing as women comedians, such as herself, Dunham, and Kaling, having obtained their shows, still daily battle with the continuing harassing of the male gaze. Her acquittal at the end of the sketch, however, is perhaps intended as a positive, forward-looking prediction that misogynistic American viewers can eventually contend with their casual and innate sexism.

Amy Schumer's "12 Angry Men" sketch, like Tina Fey and Amy Poehler's Golden Globes performances, and Viola Spolin's improvisational training technique, articulates a particularly nuanced feminist worldview, founded in a constellation of ideologies reproduced from within each of their works. This articulation, situated within the contemporary practice and performance of feminist comedy, affects the ways in which fans, feminists, and comedic practitioners conceive of themselves in relation to their each, to entertainers, and to role models. Fans, like myself, see themselves as

reflected in Schumer; they see particular aspects themselves in her person and personas, and they feel the degradation of her insults as if they were their own. Fans also, therefore, feel the empowerment of her feminist assertions, recognizing her humor as informed and articulate, and reading it as progressive and powerful. As follow Schumer, looking into her earlier stand-ups, tuning in to watch her television appearances, and going to see her film, their worldviews gradually begin to shift as they increasing adopt feminist outlooks and ideologies, transforming themselves into a new generation of the movement. Schumer's articulations, like Spolin's, Fey's, and Poehler's are complexly feminist, advocating out modeled ideologies in some cases and promoting limited worldviews in others, but they are well attended, shared online, oft quoted, and numerously re-watched. They are popular, in other words, even if they are not perfect, humorously injecting feminism within everyday popular culture.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: LAUGHING ALONG

In a memorable sketch from season three of *Inside Amy Schumer*, the comedian is walking along when she stubbles across an ornate dinner table, elaborately decorated and situated within a wooded grove. Around the table sit three famous actresses, Julia Louise-Dreyfus, Patricia Arquette, and Tina Fey, each of whom (the informed viewer will know) has advocated publically for women in film and television. A confused and star-struck Schumer approaches the group exclaiming, "I'm sorry, I'm just… I love all of you. I can't believe you're here. You're my heroes" ("Last F**kable Day"). The women are flattered and invite Schumer to join their picnic celebrating Louise-Dreyfus' "last fuckable day" ("Last F**kable Day). Schumer, who is clearly confused, asks the women to explain and is amazed to learn that a "last fuckable day" is day the media decides that an actress is no longer desirable to men ("Last F**kable Day"). The women explain that no one overtly tells you its your last day but that there are signs, for example, "when Sally Fields was Tom Hank's love interest in *Punchline*" and then his mom "twenty minutes later… in *Forrest Gump*" ("Last F**kable Day"). The rule, according to them, does not apply to men, "they are fuckable forever" ("Last F**kable Day").

The sketch, which continues in this way until they eventually send Louise-Dreyfus home in a mock Viking burial ceremony, was an instant social media success, re-shared by millions of loyal fan, first-time viewers, and self-described feminists. More

notably to me, however, was Schumer's ability to get all of the women to commit, which was a major coup especially for a beginning television comedian. They were each intentionally selected for their feminist activism; Arquette earlier that year, for example, had received criticism after her Oscar acceptance speech shedding light on the issue of unequal pay in Hollywood. Tina Fey's participation, however, was something special, potentially representing a symbolic passing of the torch from one generation of feminist comedians to the next.

I end my study with this sketch because it supports my claim of a noticeable feminist ideological reproduction, uniting the performances of Fey, Poehler, and Schumer together with Spolin's improvisational performance technique. Amy Schumer, unlike Tina Fey and Amy Poehler, did not study Chicago-style comedic improvisation, but began her career working as a stand-up comedian. Yet similar feminist ideologies are present in her work seeming to suggest some kind of influential process of ideological transference, shaping each of their efforts as notably and discursively feminist. I am not contending that these women are the first feminist comedians, nor am I contending the Viola Spolin's is the only performance technique influenced by feminist ideologies, but I am contending that fans, like myself, have noticed the pattern and that they feel empowered by its affirmation.

When I first saw Schumer's "Last F**kable Day" sketch, I remember laughing boisterously, sending the video out to all of my friends, and sharing it online. Seeing that it was trending of *Facebook* and *Twitter*, I remember feeling that I was part of a community that valued Schumer not only because she funny but also because feminist,

seeing relationship between her jokes and the movement and between her efforts and those of her processors, specifically Fey and Poehler. These women are pop culturally significant, affecting the practice, performance, and consumption of comedy, which—thanks to Jon Stewart—millennial audiences are increasingly identifying as intertwined within their senses of self, the world, politics, and society. Schumer, like Fey and Poehler, is establishing herself as a feminist role model, using her fame and her platform to promote feminist ideologies. That fan adore them because of their efforts speaks revolutionary potential of comedy, allowing fans to find pleasure in the humorous articulation of particular meaningful politics.

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